PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 348

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
10 April—20 April 2000

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CAMBRIDGE 11/00 REFERENCE

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10 April 2000

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 348**

TENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 10 April 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

DEATH OF A MEMBER

Madam Speaker: I regret to have to report to the House the death of Mr. Bernie Grant, Member for Tottenham. I am sure that hon. Members in all parts of the House will join me in mourning the loss of a colleague and in extending our sympathy to the hon. Member's family and friends.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police Numbers (London)

1. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What is the predicted net change in police numbers in London for the financial year 2000–01 over 1999–2000. [116785]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): In March 1997, the Metropolitan police service had a strength of 27,166 officers. In March this year, estimated strength was 26,034 officers. From 1 April, 474 Metropolitan police officers are being seconded to county constabularies as a result of the boundary changes to the Metropolitan police district, bringing total numbers to 25,556. The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, Sir John Stevens, intends to maintain overall numbers at around that level for the current financial year. In addition, administrative changes made by the new Commissioner should mean an extra 300 officers on the streets by the end of the financial year.

Dr. Cable: Will the Home Secretary acknowledge that even after that increase, at the end of the next financial year there will be more than 500 fewer officers than he inherited? Does he acknowledge that there is enormous anxiety, especially in suburban areas such as mine, which have suffered disproportionate cuts, about the loss of police officers and the resultant petty crime and vandalism? Does he also acknowledge that there is a serious crisis of morale in the police force in London, and that, according to the Police Federation, the pay and the conditions of employment lead many police officers to resort to working part-time as, for example, pizza delivery men and nurses?

Mr. Straw: I acknowledge the arithmetic at the beginning of the hon. Gentleman's question. However, although the total number of police officers matters, the way in which they are used—the amount of time that they spend in police stations, on operational duties and on administrative duties—is almost as important. We propose to ensure that there is less bureaucracy in the Metropolitan police service, as well as outside it. The Commissioner is taking that plan forward. It will make sure that there are more front-line operational officers available, both in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and elsewhere.

On morale, I acknowledge the serious discrepancy between the remuneration of officers who joined the police service after 1994, when the Sheehy arrangements were established by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who was then Home Secretary, and the remuneration of those who joined

afterwards. Proposals from the employers' side to increase the London allowance for Metropolitan police officers are before the police negotiating board. We hope that an agreement will be reached on 19 April.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): My right hon. Friend knows that the price of houses is high in London, and that approximately 40 per cent. of new Met recruits come from outside London. In view of the launch of the housing Green Paper and the arrival of a mayor, will the Home Secretary consult colleagues in the House and outside to consider creative ways in which to provide affordable housing for new police recruits?

Mr. Straw: Yes. The Metropolitan police service already provides a good supply of affordable housing for some new officers. However, I accept that there is a problem, especially with the remuneration of Metropolitan police officers compared with that offered by other employment opportunities. For that reason, the employers have made the offer in the police negotiating board, on the basis of funds that the Chancellor of the Exchequer made available to me and announced in the Budget three weeks ago. I hope that there will be early agreement in the negotiating board so that the differential—which, sadly, the previous Administration bequeathed to the police service—between officers who joined the service before 1994 and those who joined afterwards is greatly reduced.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Will the Home Secretary confirm that the substantial fall in police numbers in London means that in the past eight months, 23 London police stations have either had to close or are no longer open round the clock? What confidence has he that he can rectify the problem of Metropolitan police recruitment and retention? Is he prepared to say how much of the £80 million recently announced for recruitment and retention will be spent on the Metropolitan police? If it is not a good slice, the thin blue line will become ever thinner.

Mr. Straw: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on what I think is his Opposition Front-Bench debut at Home Office questions—certainly in front of me.

At all times and given any budget, whether a particular police station remains open or other changes are made in the service available to the public is a matter for the chief officer of police. No Government have ever guaranteed that an individual police station can remain open. It is essential that the police service is given the resources that it needs to provide a proper service to the public. That is what I have done in the three years in which I have set the Metropolitan police service budgets; in the previous year the police service in the Metropolitan police area enjoyed an increase of almost 5 per cent. in its budget. Adequate funds are available for this year to maintain total numbers at the level established by the Commissioner. In other words, by the end they should be similar to those at the beginning of the financial year.

I accept that there is a recruitment problem, and I have already dealt with that. Although I understand the concern of Londoners, the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Conservative Front Bench are the last people in the world who should make points about current spending on the Metropolitan police service. I remind him—he may conveniently have forgotten—that the strength of the Metropolitan police was cut by no fewer than 1,700 officers between 1992 and 1998, entirely under budgets set by the previous Conservative Administration.

Police Numbers

2. **Mr. David Chidgey** (Eastleigh): By what date he estimates the police forces of England and Wales will have returned police strength to March 1997 levels; and if he will make a statement. [116786]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): We anticipate that the impact of our crime fighting fund, which was announced last October, and the additional allocation of resources in the Budget, to which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred, will enable police numbers to reach their March 1997 level at or before the end of a full five-year parliamentary term.

Mr. Chidgey: Does the hon. Gentleman find it difficult to persuade my constituents and others that the information that police numbers in England and Wales will not be restored to the level that existed in 1997 under the previous Administration is not at odds with the election pledge of more bobbies on the beat? In particular, does he find it difficult to explain to my constituents in Hampshire that although our chief constable recently put in a bid under the crime fighting fund for more police officers, a 10 per cent. slice was taken off the top? My constituents do not want officers simply to replace those that we used to have; they want more officers to fight crime on the streets in our towns and villages.

Mr. Clarke: We are focused on having more operational police, in the way that the hon. Gentleman describes. As he has referred to his constituents, I draw his attention to the situation in Hampshire, where, although police numbers have declined by 41 to 3,411 since March 1997, civilian support staff numbers have increased by 87 over the same period. The increase in civilian numbers is significant. It includes operational posts such as scene-of-crime and fingerprint officers, and is the result of the chief constable's judgment of how to get best value in reducing crime in his county.

The hon. Gentleman will know that crime in Hampshire decreased by 4.5 per cent. in the 12 months to October 1999. For that achievement, I pay tribute to the chief constable and his force, who have been working to fight crime, rather than trying to score cheap points in party political debate.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the Minister agree that even if police numbers are falling, it is essential to keep to the minimum number of police per shift, and not to breach it? That has obviously happened in Barnet over the past few months, with only 22 policemen on a shift instead of the minimum 32. Does the hon. Gentleman see any parallel between that diminishing number of police on the beat—he must address that problem, and I know that he wants to—and the turnaround in crime in the metropolis, which increased by 8.5 per cent. last year after six years of reduction?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman and I discussed that issue in detail during the debate on the police grant. I answered his points then, and my right hon. Friend the

Home Secretary, too, has addressed them directly. We are focused on getting more operational police in Barnet, and everywhere else in the metropolitan area, by the means that we have described, which my right hon. Friend discussed a moment ago.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend agree that not only police numbers in separate forces, but the way in which those police officers are used, is important? Will he note the fact that the police in my area have managed to get 14 extra officers on the beat in Burnley and Padiham without receiving any extra resources?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is correct, which is why it was decided—rightly, in my opinion—to give chief constables operational responsibility to decide how to use their resources, rather than having the Home Secretary specify establishment numbers. Increased investment in technology, modernisation of the criminal justice system, and more effective partnerships such as those with which his force in Lancashire is taking a lead, are the ways to achieve more effective operational policing. I would like much more of the debate to focus on those aspects, because that is what the people of this country want.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I thank the Government, and the Minister in particular, for giving Staffordshire police the extra money for 83 more police officers, but does he not realise that that comes on top of a cut of 250, for which the Government will be condemned? He blandly says to the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) that he wants to leave it up to chief constables to decide what they do with the money that they are given, but does he not realise that in real terms, Staffordshire and other police forces get less money than they received in 1997? Is that not, like the Budget, another example of taking one step forward but three steps backwards?

Mr. Clarke: I have discussed precisely those issues with a delegation of Staffordshire Members of Parliament, including the hon. Gentleman, and directly with the chief constable of Staffordshire. I am well aware of the issues, and the fact is that we are increasing the money. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman referred to the Budget, because one of its effects will be to ensure that what was a three-year programme to recruit the extra officers to whom he refers will now be completed in two years, and that at least twice as many officers will be recruited in the first year as had been planned. We are moving the programme forward, and a little grace on the hon. Gentleman's part would be in order.

Active Community Unit

3. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): If he will make a statement on the work of the active community unit. [116787]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The active community unit, which works across Departments with the voluntary, statutory and business sectors, aims to encourage a step change and an increase in people's involvement in their communities. It focuses on three areas: raising people's awareness of the benefits of community activity and volunteering, making it easier for them to volunteer, and ensuring that the structures and opportunities are available to allow people to give their time as suits them best.

Mr. Hope: Does my right hon. Friend agree that community regeneration is not just about renewing the fabric of a community—its housing, schools and estates—but about actively involving people in those decisions and in how their community works? Will he visit my constituency in east Northamptonshire to see the work of the Corby volunteer bureau, the volunteer centre in Thrapston and volunteer action in Oundle? They have recruited people—young and old and from all walks of life—into voluntary activity in urban and rural areas. They actively take part in their communities. Will he come to Corby and see how we can make a difference if we promote these policies?

Mr. Boateng: I would be delighted to visit the volunteer bureau in Corby; my officials have already met the manager. It links people with local volunteering opportunities, making the link between rural and urban areas and, importantly, between the older and the younger generation. That is the way to revitalise and refurbish the sense of community that is vital to create successful communities.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): How many people are employed in the unit?

Mr. Boateng: I shall drop the hon. Gentleman a line, but I can tell him that the 100 or so people employed in the unit—*[Interruption.]*—I shall give the hon. Gentleman the exact figure later. I can tell him that those people are all gainfully employed and doing a very good job, which is more than can sometimes be said for the hon. Gentleman.

Asylum Seekers

4. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What discussions he has had with local authorities outside the south-east about the policy of dispersal of asylum seekers. [116788]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): We have had many discussions with local authorities about the dispersal of asylum seekers. The national asylum support service began operating last Monday in respect of all new applicants who have claimed asylum at their port of entry. I am pleased to announce to the House that the new asylum support scheme will be extended to cover asylum seekers who claim asylum in county while in the county of Kent on or after Monday 17 April. The effect of that will be that no asylum seeker making a claim for asylum in Kent on or after that date will be eligible for support from Kent county council or Medway council. I hope that this measure will bring considerable relief to local authorities in Kent. This is the first stage of the roll-out of the support scheme to all in-country applicants.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful for that welcome news. I am sure that all Kent MPs will leap to their feet and lavish generous gratitude on the Home Secretary for that answer. Does he agree that the impetus to cluster in

particular areas came about because of the legislation inherited from the previous Government? If he agrees that that is why we have such problems in Thanet and Dover, did he find it helpful when the Conservative party tried to encourage further applications by voting to restore cash benefits for all asylum applicants? Does he find its current posture and language helpful now, when he is trying to encourage local authorities outside the south-east to become involved in the dispersal process?

Mr. Straw: I thank my hon. Friend for his expressions of gratitude. We look forward to discovering whether similar approbation is offered by Conservative Members. The policy that we are rolling out across the country has certainly been endorsed by Councillor Melvyn Caplan, the Conservative leader of Westminster city council, who has said that the proposals

offer a considerable move forward in the need to introduce a national asylum seeker policy and relieve the pressure—

in this case, in London, but I would add "in Kent".

Of course, the considerable pressure being borne so admirably by Kent county council and the district councils in Kent and London arises directly from the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) laughs, but that is a matter of truth and of fact. I look forward to her telling us who else invented the system, if she did not do so in the 1996 Act.

At the same time as using ill-judged language on the issue, the right hon. Lady must explain why she supported a proposal that would have cost the country an additional £500 million, and would have continued the payment of cash social security benefits to all new port asylum seekers, notwithstanding the House's approval for the new national support system in kind which began operating last week.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): When the Home Secretary talks to local authorities, will he be able to help those—including Kent county council and many London boroughs—that have still not been reimbursed by Government for a large amount of their expenditure to date? Will he be able to give them any consolation with regard to the number of applications that can be processed? More case workers are needed, so that the queue can be shortened. Finally, will he be able to commend to them both this morning's statement by the Prime Minister's press secretary, and the declaration signed by all major parties last year? According to that declaration, we need to approach these difficult issues with temperate language, but above all with an accurate statement of the facts and the figures.

Mr. Straw: Just before coming to the House, I checked the position relating to costs that fall to be refunded by the Home Office, namely those relating to the support system operating in, for example, Kent, for—say—unaccompanied minors. We are refunding all expenses that Kent has claimed, or is likely to claim. I hope that the same applies to London boroughs. The hon. Gentleman will understand, however, that unit costs must be set, and that when they are exceeded—which they are by a few local authorities, although not by others—there is bound to be discussion with the auditors about why some boroughs have not been able to meet the costs, while others, including Kent, have been able to do so.

I acknowledge that there has been discussion and disagreement with, for example, Kent about what is now a £700,000 shortfall with the Department of Health in respect of unaccompanied minors. That is the subject of continuing discussion with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, because we accept that, when local authorities incur reasonable costs, those costs should be met by central Government.

The hon. Gentleman asked about additional investment to improve output. We have already recruited some hundreds of extra case workers. I can also tell the hon. Gentleman that in March the immigration and nationality directorate made 9,000 asylum decisions, as opposed to about 1,000 towards the end of last year.

All the political parties signed the declaration by the Commission for Racial Equality. I was glad to have the hon. Gentleman's approval during a debate on 2 February, when I said exactly what he has said today about the need to ensure that measured language is used. I hope that, in the light of that, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald will accept that the language used in the Conservative party's local authority manifesto is certainly not measured, that what it claims is palpably untrue, and that such language must no longer be used.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): As we wait with bated breath for the floods of gratitude from other Kent Members for the changes that will be brought in later this month, may I add my support for the changes, not least the civil penalties? Now that it has been confirmed that just about all Kent county council's costs for the support of asylum seekers have been reimbursed, what advice does the Secretary of State have for county councillors who continue to try to attach the cost of keeping asylum seekers to increases in council tax? Does he not agree that that is politics at its lowest?

Mr. Straw: I in turn thank my hon. Friend for his gratitude. I recognise the considerable pressure that his constituents have been under, as have constituents throughout Kent, given the wholly disproportionate burden of asylum seekers that they have had to bear as a result of the system introduced by the 1996 Act. I hope that the change, which will ensure that no new asylum seekers who apply within Kent are a burden on its ratepayers, will help to reduce the overall pressure on such areas; and coupled with that is the new national dispersal system.

As to the costs that have been borne by local authorities, I have seen a number of claims. An argument continues about the £700,000 in respect of Kent and unaccompanied minors. We hope that that can be sorted out, but, apart from that, I have seen no justification for some of the wholly exaggerated claims by Conservative Members and councillors, designed to try to raise anxiety about asylum seekers way beyond the reality. It is a matter for the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald to try to explain why the Conservative party has embarked on that approach.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Perhaps I can ask the Home Secretary some very simple questions. Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, leader of Kent county council, does not share his rosy view of what he has just done. Sandy Bruce-Lockhart says that, as a result of the 1996 Act, in the last six months of the previous

Government, Kent had to process 50 asylum seekers and that, today, it processes several thousands every month. The Home Secretary has talked about unjustified statements by councillors. Is that statement justified or unjustified? Is it accurate or inaccurate?

Sandy Bruce-Lockhart also says:

Of those who have been dispersed—

away from Kent—

Kent bear not only the costs but also the casework.

Therefore, if there has been a dispersal to Newcastle and there is, for example, an education problem, Kent workers have to sort it out. That also does not fit with the Secretary of State's rosy picture. Which is accurate—his or that of the leader of Kent county council, who deals with his fiasco every day of the week?

Mr. Straw: I do not remember mentioning Sandy Bruce-Lockhart. The persons I mentioned were the right hon. Lady and others in the Conservative party, who had been making ill-judged statements. However, let me deal with the two specific points that she raised. She said that there had been very few in-country claims shortly after the 1996 Act came into force. That was true because the arrangements that the previous Government had so incompetently provided ensured that there was no provision at all in the Act for in-country applicants. Such people were due to be left wholly destitute.

What happened—conveniently for the right hon. Lady—about six months after the Act came into force was that the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords said that what the previous Government had done was wholly unlawful, so responsibility had to fall on local authorities under the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Children Act 1989. Those incompetent and unco-ordinated arrangements flowed directly from the incompetent and unco-ordinated arrangements that she established under the 1996 Act.

I accept what the right hon. Lady says about dispersal away from the county of Kent. However, for the moment, existing applicants remain the responsibility of the local authorities—

Miss Widdecombe: Of Kent.

Mr. Straw: Yes, including Kent. That is all the more reason for us to get the national asylum support scheme in place, and for it not to be disrupted or sabotaged—in the way in which the right hon. Lady sought to do when she voted for an extra £500 million to be spent on eligibility for cash benefits, rather than ensuring that the system got off the ground effectively.

Miss Widdecombe: As a matter of fact and accuracy, I have never voted for an extra £500 million. The amendment that we proposed to the House simply said that the Secretary of State should come to the House and assure us that administrative arrangements were in place. What did he do? He came to the House and had to admit that they were not in place, and that he was going to delay their implementation for another six months. What that proved beyond any doubt was the viability of our amendment. I therefore think that, if he has any decent sense of shame, he might start keeping quiet about his attitude to that amendment, rather than trying to distort what we did.

The right hon. Gentleman has talked several times today about unsuitable language so let me ask him a straightforward question. Does he agree that the large majority of people who come to this country to seek asylum are bogus? Is he prepared to use that word, or does he agree with his recently acquired hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) that the word "bogus" stirs up racial hatred, despite the fact that the Prime Minister has used it five times in recent weeks?

Mr. Straw: Let me deal with the first point, about the £500 million—[HON. MEMBERS: "Don't forget the second."] I was asked two sets of questions, and I certainly shall not forget the second one—I never do.

I was asked questions about the £500 million. The simple fact is that, in the other place, the official Opposition voted for the amendment. When I wrote to the right hon. Lady to ask whether that position had the support of the official Opposition in this place, she wrote back to me and said, "Yes, we support the position." She described the amendment, which was to add £500 million of costs in a year, year-on-year, year after year, as "sensible" and "common sense". That was endorsement. Although I quite understand that it caused very great dissension within the Conservative party that she should have shot from the hip yet again and missed the target in the way that she did, the simple truth is that she supported the vote in the other place and backed it in this place. The £500 million was an extra £500 million, on top of the current cost of asylum seekers. Moreover, it would have encouraged a large number of additional unfounded claims for asylum.

We all have a responsibility to choose our language with care. On the figures, about one third—the figure varies from month to month—of applicants who seek asylum in this country have their application either for asylum or for exceptional leave to remain accepted. Although of course we wish to bear down very strongly, as we are doing, on the numbers of unfounded asylum applications, the simple fact is that no one can know whether an application is founded or unfounded, genuine or not, until the claim has been properly examined.

When it comes to ill-judged and unacceptable language, what the right hon. Lady needs to explain is her unbelievable and wholly unjustifiable claim that the Labour party has made this country "a soft touch" for organised asylum racketeers, whom she claims are flooding our country with bogus asylum seekers. She needs to explain that statement not only because it is not true, but because she has voted against two sets of proposals designed to bear down on the racketeers—the first, in 1996, to deal with racketeers directly and to control them properly, which she resisted when we moved amendments from the Opposition Front Bench; and the second, on civil penalties on hauliers who bring in clandestines, which is already working and which she has so vehemently opposed.

Miss Widdecombe: The Home Secretary promised to answer about the word "bogus", but he did not—I suppose that we must just add that to the list of promises broken. How can the Government say that they have not made this country a soft touch when the facts and figures speak for themselves? We left the Government, under the 1996 Act, a 40 per cent. decrease in asylum seeking. Since then,

the numbers have doubled, and the backlog has more than doubled. Every year, tens of thousands of people who are refused permission to stay still stay on regardless.

The asylum system has deteriorated to unbelievable and unprecedented levels since the Government took power, yet they say that somehow it has nothing to do with them. It has everything to do with them. They presided over the mess. They announced when they came in that they were not going to implement the 1996 Act. They suggested an amnesty for people who had not had their cases determined. They reversed high-profile deportation decisions. They removed the primary purpose rule from the immigration system. The message went out to the rest of the world that Britain is a soft touch. The Home Secretary sent that message—it is his responsibility.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady should have looked behind her. That rant was not impressive even to her erstwhile supporters, still less to the House and the country.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Marvellous. Wonderful.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman says that with a broad and disbelieving grin across his face.

The right hon. Lady is suffering from amnesia about amnesty. The only party which ever introduced an amnesty was hers, in the early 1990s. After months of my challenging her on the subject, she finally admitted on 2 February that the Conservatives had introduced one, but went on to say:

we have learned from that mistake—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2000; Vol. 343, c. 1056.]

It was, as she said, a mistake.

The right hon. Lady suggests that the current asylum situation is entirely the responsibility of the Government. I accept responsibility for many things. One of the first things that I did as Home Secretary was to make it clear in the House that I would be responsible for matters relating to my functions as Home Secretary, but it is ludicrous and it debases debate to imply that the Kosovo war was caused by me as Home Secretary or that the increasing disruption in Somalia, the increasing terrorist disruption in Sri Lanka and the problems in Afghanistan are all down to me as Home Secretary. If they were, I would solve them quickly.

The right hon. Lady should look at more than just six months. Numbers went down immediately after the passage of the 1996 Act. I have explained one reason. Another is that the Dublin convention, which the previous Government signed and which took seven years to come into force, took effect in October 1997 and has made returns very difficult. Numbers have gone up and down. They rose rapidly in the early 1990s and again after the 1993 Act. They have risen in recent months, not least because of disruption in the countries that I have just mentioned. The system deteriorated, not least because of a lack of investment and some extraordinary decisions made by the right hon. Lady when she was in power. I am pleased to tell the House that, as a result of considerable investment, we are greatly increasing the number of claims that are decided on—up to 9,000, which is an all-time record. Although numbers have risen, the time taken to deal with applications has been cut from 20 months, when the right hon. Lady left office, to 13 months in December of last year.

Identity Parades

6. **Mrs. Ann Cryer** (Keighley): What plans he has to stop accused persons from changing their appearance prior to an identity parade. [116790]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Effective identity parades always depend to some extent on the co-operation of suspects. The Government do not believe that legal powers to prevent them from changing their appearance before a parade would be workable, but if they do so between the taking of a photograph at the time of arrest or after charge and any attempt to hold an identification parade, that may be given in evidence if their case comes to trial. The police may then consider whether an identification can be made by other means. Group identification, use of video film and confrontation are methods specifically provided for in the code of practice on identification procedures.

Mrs. Cryer: I thank my hon. Friend for his constructive comments. May I draw his attention to the case of my young constituent Gemma, who was indecently assaulted last November? Due to the suspect changing his appearance, plus the use of woolly hats and a two-month delay, when she eventually got to the identity parade, she was unable to pick him out. Perhaps we could make greater use of photographs or videos on arrest to protect the likes of Gemma, so that further women and girls do not have to experience such a distressing and unresolved situation.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. I have been briefed on the case of Gemma, her constituent. I pay tribute to the campaign work that has been done by Gemma's mother to highlight the issue of suspects changing their appearance prior to identity parades. She assembled a petition and there has been press coverage of this important matter. I emphasise that the code of practice governing identification procedures is under review, so an opportunity is provided to reconsider the detailed rules. A particular issue in the review is how the police should react where the suspect dresses in such a way as to disguise a distinguishing feature, as in the ways mentioned by my hon. Friend.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I appreciate that there is a real problem of a suspect changing his appearance at an identity parade. Will the Minister support my move to bring English law in line with Scots law, where a trial must be brought within 110 days of the accused being charged, for the simple reason that witnesses tend to forget appearance, even down to the colour of a woolly hat, as the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) mentioned?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Lady raises a fair point for debate. I can confirm that we are considering ways of meeting that point. It is the case that identification parades in particular are made less reliable the more time passes between the event and the parade.

Drug Treatment (Offenders)

7. **Jackie Ballard** (Taunton): If he will make a statement on the availability of drug treatment facilities for offenders. [116791]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): A key element of the Government's crime reduction strategy is to get drug misusing offenders into treatment and thereby reduce drug-related crime.

Initiatives in hand include piloting the drug treatment and testing order and development of arrest referral.

Jackie Ballard: I thank the Minister for that response. I am sure that he will be aware of the recent report of Viscountess Runciman of Doxford and the comments within it that it is important that diversion via the criminal justice system does not distort the use of current drug treatment services or the allocation of future resources at the expense of the majority of problem drug users who do not commit crime or who, with effective treatment, could be prevented from committing crime in future. In the light of those comments, what targets will the right hon. Gentleman be setting for the maximum time that anyone, offender or not, should have to wait for drug treatment?

Mr. Boateng: We will not be setting targets, but we will be working closely with the Department of Health, with a view to recruiting about 300 drug workers to complement the existing facilities. There is, as the hon. Lady has identified, a capacity issue. By April 2001, we have a target of 685 drug workers to be recruited and trained. We believe that that will ensure that the concerns that Viscountess Runciman expressed are not realised.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the drug treatment programmes will be more successful if a significant number of the drug workers are recruited from outside agencies that have built up expertise, mainly by using former addicts, who have far more credibility in the eyes of prisoners?

Mr. Boateng: We know from experience in the prison service that the voluntary sector, including the use of people who have hands-on, day-to-day experience of having to cope with drug problems in their own life, can make a real and appreciable difference to the success rate in turning people around from drugs.

Pilot projects in relation to work between the probation service, the police and drug addicts have used the voluntary sector. That has proved extremely successful, reducing average drug expenditure from £400 a week to £70, with a corresponding decrease in reliance on crime. That is good news, and the voluntary sector has a vital role to play.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Does the Minister accept that many drug addicts finance their habit by crime? Yet in many areas where addicts wish to break the habit and go on a methadone withdrawal programme, they face a waiting list. They are told to go away and continue financing the habit, and return in a few months. How does the hon. Gentleman reconcile his rather complacent answer with this extraordinary situation?

Mr. Boateng: The answer is not complacent. We have recognised the need to recruit more drug workers and we are doing so. The right hon. Gentleman should reflect on the experience of his time in office and compare it to what we are doing now. This Government have made available an extra £217 million to tackle the deficit in treatment, and that is money that would never have been provided had he been returned to office at the general election.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Has the Minister seen the comment made by a spokesman for RAPT—the Rehabilitation of Addicted Prisoners Trust—that while the number of people in prison who suffer from alcohol dependency or whose crimes involve alcohol misuse greatly outnumbers those dependent on illegal drugs, the amount spent on illegal drug misuse in prisons is some £70 million but virtually nothing is spent on alcohol offenders? Why is that?

Mr. Boateng: It is certainly not true to say that nothing is spent. Not as much is spent on alcohol abuse as is spent on drug abuse, but we recognise that the two are increasingly linked. It is important that we have in place the treatment facilities that deal with both where appropriate, and that is what we seek to do.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister recognise that his policies on letting out more than 2,000 convicted drug dealers and more than 200 international drug traffickers are putting ever more strain on drug treatment facilities? Was not his and the Prime Minister's slogan "Tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime" just another bogus slogan?

Mr. Boateng: No, because the figures to which the hon. Gentleman refers disguise the fact that the home detention curfew scheme has had a success rate of more than 90 per cent. He and his party supported the proposal on the Home Affairs Committee and his party did not vote against it when it had the opportunity to do so in the House. The scheme is working and it is about better protecting the public, which we intend to continue.

Police Time

8. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands): What recent discussions he has had with chief constables about increasing the amount of police officers' time spent on front-line operations against crime and disorder. [116792]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I most recently discussed those matters with chief constables at the Association of Chief Police Officers spring seminar on Thursday. The introduction of best value into the police service and the recycling of efficiency savings into front line policing should allow more police officer time to be spent on reducing crime. Information technology systems being delivered under the national strategy for police information systems and new

radio technology being provided as part of the public safety radio communications project will also do much to free officers from administrative burdens.

Charlotte Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I am sure that he is aware that Staffordshire police authority spends 18.3 per cent. of its net expenditure on pensions, which is 50 per cent. above the national average. Since our meeting in March, has he had time to consider ways in which Staffordshire might be able to overcome that historic funding problem? Unlike the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), I welcome the early recruitment of extra police officers for Staffordshire.

Mr. Clarke: I first pay tribute to the work being done by my hon. Friend in campaigning for proper resourcing for policing in Staffordshire and, in particular, addressing the problem with pensions to which she refers. The increasing size of the pensions component within the funding formula nationally went up from 13.2 per cent. in 1998–99 to 14.5 per cent. in 1999–2000. As she says, Staffordshire's 18.3 per cent. is among the highest of the proportions being taken out. As my hon. Friend knows from our meeting, we are actively considering the possibility of having a uniform system across all forces, so the same proportion would be taken out. That would involve serious managerial issues, as I know she understands, but we are actively considering the best way to achieve that. I hope that we will be able to advance proposals for consideration before too long.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Will the Minister give all necessary support to the Hertfordshire police force in its new responsibilities for policing boroughs such as Hertsmere, which were formerly part of the Metropolitan force's area? Is the Minister aware that up to 1 April, there was a perceived lack of any front line police operations—or any other form of visible policing—in Hertsmere, with a total increase in crime of 11 per cent., an increase in violent crime of 51 per cent. and a drop in the clear-up rate of 27 per cent? Is that not an unsatisfactory state of affairs that needs to be put right, and does it not make a mockery of loud claims from Ministers to be better protecting the public?

Mr. Clarke: I certainly can agree to give all support to the forces concerned. I have discussed the matter with the Hertfordshire constabulary and with the Metropolitan police, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge the efforts of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to bring about the changes that are being made, which were in response to representations from Members of Parliament with constituencies in the home counties.

An Audit Commission report in 1998–99 found that the national average for police officer time spent in public was 52 per cent. The highest figure was in north Yorkshire, at 73 per cent., and the lowest was in Derbyshire, at 40 per cent. We need to achieve much higher and more uniform levels across the country. That is why we are implementing changes such as are taking place in Hertsmere, and why we are making the changes that I mentioned earlier.

Domestic Violence

9. **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden): What progress is being made with measures to combat domestic violence. [116793]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): We are providing at least £4.5 million through the crime reduction programme for projects that aim to reduce domestic violence.

We have issued fresh guidance to agencies that have to tackle domestic violence, and we have included domestic violence in police best value performance indicators. We continue to take forward the raft of measures set out in the Home Office-women's unit publication "Living without Fear: an Integrated Approach to Tackling Violence against Women".

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, and I am sure that it will hearten everyone involved in trying to reduce the scourge of domestic violence. In my borough of Merton, incidents of repeat domestic violence are 10 per cent. above the London average. In the light of that, will he welcome the borough's initiative to put in a joint bid, with Sutton, Kingston and Richmond, to the crime fighting fund for money for an outreach team to deal specifically with the victims of domestic violence? Will he look kindly on that bid when he receives it?

Mr. Boateng: I very much appreciate the initiative that I know that my hon. Friend has taken in Mitcham and Morden regarding domestic violence. I am glad that neighbouring boroughs are putting partnership arrangements in place. I feel sure that the quality of the bid that is likely to emerge from such partnership arrangements is likely to commend itself to officials. However, I cannot anticipate the outcome of the bid.

Asylum Seekers

10. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): If he will estimate how many asylum seekers are residing in Eastbourne. [116794]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): No asylum seekers have been dispersed to Eastbourne under the interim voluntary dispersal scheme operated by the Local Government Association, the Association of London Government and the London asylum seekers consortium, although 1,797 households have been dispersed elsewhere since 6 December 1999.

Information on the number of asylum applicants residing in Eastbourne is not available.

Mr. Waterson: Why cannot the Minister answer a relatively simple question? Why have the Government postponed dispersal arrangements in the south-east, even though London boroughs are still abusing the hospitality

of places such as Eastbourne by dumping asylum seekers there without telling the local authority? Will she and her colleagues stop using patronising and insensitive words and phrases such as "ill judged" and "unacceptable" to describe the legitimate concerns of ordinary people, such as my constituents, as articulated by the Opposition?

Mrs. Roche: Clearly, the hon. Gentleman has been elsewhere this afternoon as he cannot have heard my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's announcement about in-country applicants in Kent. He must also have been elsewhere when the announcement was made about asylum support arrangements for people at ports. He must have been somewhere else entirely in 1996, when the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) introduced the arrangements.

The Government are putting right the shambles that the previous Government created. We will continue to use measured terms to describe the very unmeasured language used by the Opposition.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): When asylum seekers are dispersed around the country to be accommodated in towns such as Eastbourne, which have no history of asylum seekers living in them, is it not all the more important for politicians to take care about the language that they use? Will not the sort of rant that we heard earlier this afternoon and the hysteria in the tabloids lead to serious trouble sooner or later? Asylum seekers will be attacked and harassed, and people will be hurt. In the longer term, will not that cause enormous damage to race relations in this country?

Mrs. Roche: My hon. Friend speaks with authority and expertise on the subject: not only is he a London Member of Parliament, but he chairs the all-party group which considers refugee issues. He is absolutely correct. We have said with regard to dispersal that we will look into areas where there are multicultural communities and support arrangements. That is why we are also grant-funding the Refugee Council to do just that.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): In the context of Councillor Caplan's remarks quoted earlier, were the Government prudent to arouse so much hope in so many beleaguered authorities by their overall 1 April start date, when they have patently been unable to deliver it?

Mrs. Roche: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we were very grateful for the remarks made by the leader of Westminster council, which were rather more prudent than those of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and other Conservative Members. We have looked at the lessons that have been learned, particularly when the Conservative party was in office, with regard to rolling out the scheme. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Lady may laugh, but she was clearly shocked at my right hon. Friend's announcement today about Kent. I should have thought that as a Kent Member of Parliament, she would be rejoicing.

Truancy

11. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): What assistance he proposes for schools and local authorities to combat truancy. [116795]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Truancy is a major contributor to youth offending and can have a devastating impact on a child's prospects for later life. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has allocated extra resources through the social inclusion pupil support grant programme, worth some £500 million over three years, to help reduce levels of unauthorised absence and exclusion.

Secondly, as part of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, we are introducing an increase in the penalty on parents for failing to ensure that a child attends school regularly.

Thirdly, we are considering whether we can encourage the type of scheme that is active in York, for example, in which police, education welfare officers and social services officers work together as a team to pick up children who are truant on the streets and bring them back into education.

Mr. Cunningham: I welcome my hon. Friend's statement. Will he tell me how much of the £500 million pupil support grant will be spent in Coventry and the west midlands, and what schemes he has in mind?

Mr. Clarke: I cannot tell my hon. Friend the detailed breakdown, local education authority by local education authority. However, I can say that a wide range of different types of scheme is being introduced. The most important is to provide proper education places so that children who are otherwise being excluded or truanting can receive a proper education, sometimes in school, sometimes out of school. There have been some successful examples of that in the west midlands, I believe.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Who gains if parents of truants are sent to jail for three months?

Mr. Clarke: The main thing is to ensure that parents take their responsibilities—*[Interruption.]* I will answer the question, but in my own way rather than in the way required by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson).

The purpose of the legislation is to ensure that parents live up to their responsibilities to make sure that their children go to school, as there is a massive correlation between people who do not attend school early in life and crime later in life. In fact, I believe it extremely unlikely that the courts will choose to imprison a parent, save in exceptional circumstances. Making the offence imprisonable gives the courts much greater flexibility in responding to the circumstances of individual cases.

Asylum Seekers

12. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What was the average time taken during 1999 to decide applications for refugee status for asylum seekers admitted into the United Kingdom. [116796]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): In 1999, the average time taken to decide asylum applications inherited from before July 1993 was 91 months. For those applications lodged after July 1993, the average time taken was 16 months. By December 1999, the time taken had reduced to 13 months, compared with 20 months in April 1997.

Mr. Wilkinson: While the speeding up of the processing is welcome, is it not the case that the number of applicants has doubled since this Labour Government came to power? Is it not also the case that if there are 100,000 applicants waiting now, which I believe is true, some 87 per cent. of those will, at the conclusion of processing, be found to be bogus? Would it not be much better to conclude the processing within, let us say, one month, reducing the burden on the taxpayer and eliminating the unrealistic expectations that are fed upon by those who encourage this despicable trade in asylum seekers?

Mr. O'Brien: It sounded as if the hon. Gentleman were supporting the Government's policy of a civil penalty, which aims to deal with these issues. For 1999, the figures were as follows: recognised as asylum seekers, 36 per cent.; given exceptional leave to remain, 11 per cent.; not recognised, 54 per cent. That helps put the matter in perspective.

Our aim is to deliver most initial decisions within two months, and most appeals within a further four months, by April 2001. We are meeting the targets for new applications from families with children. About 270 additional asylum decision-makers have been recruited and trained, and are now working. A further 200 are being recruited, and staffing levels are being monitored closely to ensure that output targets are met. New processes have been developed to speed up asylum decision-making without compromising quality.

We are making more decisions than ever before, and we are doing so fairly. We are now reaching the highest number of decisions that has ever been reached in any month. We have more staff working in the system than ever before. Where the previous Government failed completely, we are delivering.

Licensing Laws

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Madam Speaker, with permission I should like to make a statement about licensing reform. I am today laying before the House a White Paper setting out proposals for the comprehensive modernisation of the alcohol, public entertainment and night refreshment licensing laws in England and Wales.

The present laws are complex and no longer match the expectations of the public and the industries concerned or the needs of community safety. For example, the Licensing Act 1964 provides for more than 40 different kinds of licence or permission.

The present system hinders business development and investment. Anyone wanting to change a licence in any way has to follow bureaucratic procedures that generate unnecessary costs and court hearings. There is often considerable duplication with planning controls and health and safety procedures. Many premises serving alcohol also require public entertainment licences, and so their operations have to satisfy an entirely separate and parallel licensing procedure run by the local authorities.

There have been no substantive changes to these laws for almost 40 years, while some aspects of the law have changed little in more than a century. In many ways, the law as it stands makes more difficult the problems of policing and public order. Fixed closing times may encourage binge drinking around last orders, with people hitting the streets—and sometimes each other—at the same time.

The law concerning the sale and consumption of alcohol by children and young people is profoundly confusing. Few people know exactly what the law requires, and those who do see little sense in it. A person aged 17 may enter a bar, but may not purchase an alcoholic drink. A person aged 18 standing next to him may purchase a drink, take it into a pub garden and lawfully give it to a five-year-old.

Venues providing hospitality and leisure are changing a great deal. It is now much more difficult to differentiate between a pub, a café, a wine bar or a restaurant. The old licensing categories can no longer keep up with these changes. The effect is to force businesses to obtain multiple permissions at significant additional cost without delivering sufficient benefits or protections to the public.

To modernise the system, the White Paper proposes a single new licensing system which will give people more choice about where and when they eat, drink and enjoy themselves, while providing much better protection against the misuse of alcohol, especially in relation to sales to children. The White Paper proposes stronger powers where licensed premises cause crime and disorder, place the safety of the public at risk or lead to unreasonable nuisance for local residents.

The White Paper therefore envisages that more flexible opening hours should be balanced by clearer licensing criteria and more effective remedies against businesses that fall down on their social responsibilities. The proposals should significantly reduce the regulatory burden on business. In an appendix to the White Paper, we estimate that they should help to cut the costs of business by around £190 million a year.

Responsibility for the licensing system is split between local authorities and magistrates. Magistrates deal with alcohol licensing, while local authorities deal with the licensing of public entertainment, theatres, cinemas, late-night refreshment and planning and development control. We have carefully considered who should have responsibility for running the new streamlined and integrated arrangements, and have concluded that it should be local authorities.

Following the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, local authorities have important duties to tackle crime and disorder in their areas and are best placed to make judgments about local impact. They are also properly accountable to the people affected by their decisions. We therefore believe that they should decide which premises should be licensed and what operating conditions should apply, albeit within a national framework of clear criteria and under fair and consistent local procedures defined in statutory rules and guidance.

The criminal courts will continue to deal with offences against licensing laws. Local magistrates will therefore continue to have an important part to play in ensuring that licensing laws work properly for the benefit of free and safe communities. Local authorities' licensing decisions will be subject to review by the courts on appeal. We propose that that should take place in the Crown court, but we recognise that there are other options—magistrates or special tribunals, for example—and we are ready to consider representations on that, as on any other issue.

The White Paper proposals can be summarised as follows. There will be a single integrated scheme for licensing premises that sell alcohol, provide public entertainment or provide late-night refreshment. It will set out operating conditions, which will relate to the impact on crime and disorder, public safety and public disturbance. Licence conditions should protect against those threats, but not interfere in other ways with how premises are run. The conditions attached to such licences will be set locally according to the balance of the operator's requirements, the views of residents and assessments by police and fire authorities.

A new system of personal licences will allow holders to sell or serve alcohol for consumption on or off any premises. There will be new measures to back up restrictions on under-age drinking. To counter and minimise public disorder resulting from fixed closing times, flexible opening hours may be introduced as a condition of the premises licence, with the possibility that some venues—I emphasise that that means only some venues—may operate up to 24-hour opening, seven days a week, subject to consideration of the impact on local residents.

We propose tough and uncompromising new powers for the police to deal quickly with violence and disorderly behaviour by closing premises that licence holders have allowed to become the focus of such misbehaviour. We propose that the age for the consumption of alcohol in licensed premises, and for its purchase, should remain 18, with better provision for the enforcement of those powers. However, 16 and 17-year-olds will be able to consume beer or wine served with a meal.

Children should be allowed access to any part of suitable licensed premises at the personal licence holder's discretion, but licensing authorities would have powers to restrict or deny access by children to unsuitable licensed

[Mr. Jack Straw]

venues. The new personal and premises licences would be issued by local authorities. An avenue of appeal for parties, including the police and local residents, would be available through the courts.

Licences would be supported by a flexible range of sanctions—including temporary closure and temporary reduction in opening hours—instead of the present all-or-nothing sanction of loss of licence. In the wake of the Marchioness Thames safety inquiry, there would be new requirements for licensing the sale of alcohol on boats travelling within England and Wales. New arrangements will be made for non-profit-making clubs—working men's, political, ex-services, sports and social clubs—that supply alcohol to their members to preserve their special status.

This is a radical package of measures; I am convinced that it strikes an important and necessary balance between the needs of business and the concerns of local residents. The new measures will be good for the police, because they should help them to cope with late-night disorder and reduce crime. The measures should be good for business, because they will sweep away red tape and offer business real flexibility. They will be good for consumers—citizens and visitors to this country alike—by creating a safer environment in which consumers can have greater choice. They will be good for families, by creating more opportunities for them to spend leisure time together without fear of intimidation or disorder, and by providing better protection against under-age drinking. The measures will be good for local residents, who will acquire a bigger say in a licensing process that will be properly accountable to them.

In preparing legislation to bring proposals before Parliament, we shall welcome and take account of any suggestions for improving the way in which licensing decisions are dealt with, or on any other aspect of the proposals. We ask for responses to be received by the Home Office by the end of July. We shall, of course, consult the Welsh Assembly on the proposals as they may apply to Wales, including on whether there remains a demand for Sunday opening polls.

I commend the proposals to the House.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): I thank the Home Secretary for his customary courtesy in allowing us to have an early sight of the White Paper. We are not entirely sure about the new format of the document, with all its exciting pictures and photographs, but we are sure that Labour Members will greatly enjoy them.

Angela Smith (Basildon): The hon. Gentleman is a sharp wit.

Mr. Heald: I am grateful to be called that.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): My hon. Friend said "twit".

Mr. Heald: No, she did not. I am not getting into that sort of argy-bargy.

I welcome much of the Home Secretary's statement. We believe that it should be possible to move forward constructively in a spirit of consensus. There was widespread agreement that the licensing laws needed modernising. We agree that the ending of the terminal hour and its replacement with flexible hours should end the practice of drinking to a deadline. The Police Superintendents Association of England and Wales commented:

> this will contribute to the policing of public disorder associated with drink . . . we would expect a staggering of closing times—

[Laughter.] I stress that it is a staggering of closing times, not staggering at closing time. I am quoting the association directly.

A simpler system of penalties with a graduated scale is also useful and should enable the licensing authority better to target penalties. We welcome the tougher powers on under-age drinking and the fact that the police will be able to close rowdy houses. The new split system of licensing premises separately from individuals was strongly supported by the Brewers and Licensed Retailers Association. We believe that it could have benefits. We shall study the White Paper carefully and formulate a detailed and constructive response after careful consultations.

Although there are some points in the White Paper on which we agree, there are—as ever—issues that cause us concern. From a brief reading of the document, three matters are of particular concern.

First, we should resist the attempt to remove all powers from licensing justices, especially when it comes to licensing individuals. I was surprised to read, on page 22 of the White Paper, that it is seriously suggested that individuals should be licensed simply on the basis that they have an accredited qualification, without even being interviewed by a local authority. One would not employ people merely because they had a degree; one would want to see them to find out what sort of people they are.

That point highlights a mistake in the White Paper. Magistrates are used to forming views on the merits of the individuals who appear before them. They know the local area and the problems that the licensee will face. Furthermore, they are aware of the problems that have come up in criminal cases that they have heard. They do not represent any political interests in making decisions on licensing.

The Police Federation today said:

> we are totally opposed to powers to grant licences being transferred to local authorities. We believe that these matters should remain a judicial responsibility and not be a political judgment of the local authority.

Will the Home Secretary listen to representations that magistrates should not lose all their powers, particularly over the licensing of individuals, or is his mind closed on that?

Secondly, we are concerned about late-night disorder. Will the Home Secretary guarantee that there is a firm regime to ensure that the changes do not lead to unsupervised late-night disorder making residents' life a misery? In his White Paper, he says that consideration will be given to the views of local residents, but we would like to know how that will be done and whether the presumption will be against residents so that they will have to prove their objections against a presumption in favour of a licence. What estimate has he made of the overall effects of the proposals on alcohol consumption and illness? Can he assure local residents that the measures will improve the situation for them?

Thirdly, we have had representations about Sunday being a special day. Will the Home Secretary explain in more detail the reasons behind his decision not to make any recognition of the special nature of Sunday in these changes? Will he confirm that he has no proposals to treat Sunday differently from any other day? When the proposals are brought to the House in legislation, the Opposition will have a free vote on the question of Sundays; will the Government have a free vote?

Finally, what is the timetable for legislation? We see that there is a timetable for responses, but do the Government aim to introduce these proposals in the Queen's Speech in 2000 or at another time?

There is much to be welcomed in the White Paper, but we should like reassurance on those three crucial points. We are prepared to be constructive and to try to reach consensus, but it is important that the Government are prepared to listen.

Mr. Straw: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the manner in which he made his comments. On the photographs, my contribution to the typographical design and layout of the White Paper was to remove additional photographs of myself that I spotted. I am afraid that I take a rather po-faced view about White Papers, but I point out gently that the previous Government introduced the revolutionary idea of including photographs in such documents.

As I made clear in my statement, this is a White Paper, so it contains reasonably firm proposals, but the point of publishing one well in advance of legislation is to seek the views of the House, interested organisations and the public. We shall take those properly into account, and I almost guarantee that the final proposals will differ to some degree from the proposals in the White Paper; that is the whole purpose of having such consultation and open debate.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the powers of licensing justices. To pick him up on one detail, if someone simply had an accredited qualification, they would not be granted a licence by virtue of that fact, without an interview. They might be granted a licence without an interview if they also had no previous convictions, which is an extremely important clarification. If they had convictions, they would almost certainly have to be subject to interview. At the moment, licensing justices who have before them someone who has an accredited qualification and no previous convictions are almost bound, as a matter of obligation in law, to issue that person with a licence, unless something else is known about them.

The question of who should make the initial decisions about licences is a matter of fine judgment, which we debated at some length. We continue to be open to argument about that. If we are to have a streamlined system, one authority must make the decisions about all the licences that affect a particular set of premises. At present, the local authorities have considerable sway over the circumstances in which licensed premises operate. The only licence that in practice is issued by the magistrates is the alcohol licence. I appreciate the very good work that has been done in the past by magistrates, and they will continue to have a significant role in these proposals, as I will explain.

It is a matter not of the local authorities exercising a political judgment, with a capital P, but of ensuring that they can develop a policy for determining, for example, whether 24-hour opening can safely take place without disruption to residents. Typically, that would be only in the centre of large cities and towns. With regard to public houses in residential areas, of which there are many, the authority's policy must ensure that it operates in a way that gives first preference to the interests of the residents. That answers another point raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Apart from split responsibility, the problem with using the courts is that courts of law must operate under much less flexible arrangements. As I will take proper account of the hon. Gentleman's points, I ask him to consider this in return: we thought that the sensible way to square the circle was for the local authorities to make the initial decisions about all licensing matters—as I said in my statement, within clear national criteria and clear statutory rules and guidance about how they operate locally—but to provide for a right of appeal to the courts.

I said that our preference was for the appeal to go to the Crown court, where there would be two magistrates sitting with a Crown court judge to hear the appeal. They would be experienced magistrates, so they would have a clear role there. I also said in my statement that although that is our preference, we accept that there are arguments for using the magistrates as the appeal court or for a special tribunal, and we will consider them.

The issue of Sunday is discussed in the White Paper. As it happens, given my Nonconformist background, I am one of those who voted against an extension of Sunday opening hours for shops, but that argument was lost. It is difficult to argue subsequently for special arrangements for Sunday opening for public houses or, say, supermarkets, separate from those that apply to shops. It is better for those to be taken into account in the overall policy set by the local authority, except for Wales.

Unless the law is changed—I take my cue entirely from Welsh Members and the Welsh Assembly—it will be possible to trigger polls in Welsh counties in 2004. That is a matter for the people of Wales, as expressed through their representatives.

On timetable, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman any more detail, except that we intend to legislate as soon as we can, once we have gathered together the consultations.

Madam Speaker: May we now have a brisk exchange? There are so many hon. Members seeking to put questions that it may not be possible for me to call them all. I am sure that the Secretary of State will oblige with brisk replies. Thank you.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): In this sensible package of ideas, my right hon. Friend did not mention the difficult matter of the direct connection between alcohol and violence in domestic circumstances. Will he undertake to bear that in mind? Longer drinking hours may result in even greater pressure on those who abuse alcohol, and that is in no one's interest.

Mr. Straw: Yes, I will. My statement was replete with concern about the effect of alcohol on crime.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The White Paper is greatly welcomed by the Liberal Democrats. It seems to contain eminently sensible proposals for the modern age, both for the customer and for business.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

I have two short questions. First, can the Secretary of State be slightly more specific? When applications are made to the local authority, as I believe that they should be, will the local authority have absolute discretion to accede to or turn them down—for example, on the ground that there are too many other premises in the immediate area for the extension to be needed or properly managed? Secondly, linked to the question of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), will the incidence of violence in or outside public houses in the community be taken into account when applications are considered?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for the measures. No absolute discretion will be available to local authorities. They will have to work within the law as this House and the other place provide and, as I have said, under national criteria, statutory rules and guidance. The police and residents will have a right of appeal against any local authority's decision.

The answer to the hon. Gentleman's second question is emphatically yes. As he will know from the White Paper, we propose to give the police important additional powers, including one, at the decision of a police inspector or someone above that rank, to close for 24 hours licensed premises where there is serious disorder—under similar powers to those already available to fire authorities.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, although the proposals will rightly assist those who want a pleasant, social drink, residents whose lives can be made a misery by loud music, riotous behaviour, hooliganism and vandalism, about which I have many complaints in my constituency, will be protected? Will he also confirm that organisations such as Gorton Trades and Labour club will retain its special status?

Mr. Straw: I had Gorton Trades and Labour club at the forefront of my mind when I agreed the proposals; clubs will retain their special status. The proposals in the White Paper will give local residents a much greater say in, and influence over, the licensing arrangements for pubs and clubs. Indeed, my right hon. Friend's comments illustrate the fact that current arrangements are not properly working to safeguard local residents.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Pursuant to the previous question, since the impact of the proposals on inner-city constituencies impinges particularly on the residential community, does the Secretary of State recognise that the number of police supervising the behaviour of licensees in recent decades has remained static, while the number of licences in the west end has risen sharply, and that, until that ratio changes, the residential community will take little comfort from his encouraging reassurances?

Mr. Straw: I acknowledge the particular pressure on residents of areas such as the one that the right hon. Gentleman represents. I also accept that he has not had a chance to read the White Paper. I look forward to his views and those of his local authorities, particularly Westminster. Modernisation of licensing arrangements and greatly strengthened powers of the police, local authorities and courts should ensure that his resident constituents have a better and safer life.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): Pursuant to the previous two questions, I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that extension of licensing hours and, indeed, changes of licensed premises are of particular importance in a constituency such as mine. Although I welcome the importance that he attaches to the opinion of local residents, will he ensure that they may know well in advance of any proposal either for extension or change of venue? At the moment, it is virtually impossible for my constituents to know what is proposed.

Mr. Straw: Yes. Current arrangements are obscure and complicated, and residents often do not know about proposals until it is too late. I hope that a simplified but toughened system will ensure that one authority—the local authority—must describe the policies that are to be followed before it makes decisions in respect of individual licences, so that there is proper and effective consultation, not least in the crime and disorder partnerships, for which Camden is a model for much of the rest of the country.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does the Home Secretary share my fascination with the fact that, owing to the much more liberal and relaxed regime in continental countries—France in particular, but others, too—there is often much less disorder and drunkenness? I therefore warmly welcome the proposals if he has in any way modelled them on the continental experience, and generally welcome his much more liberal and civilised approach to the matter.

I seek a reassurance, however, that sanctions will be tough and effective. Although I strongly support the idea that the licensing regime should be as liberal as possible, it must surely be coupled with strong, reassuring sanctions so that, if disorder arises from the licensing of premises, it will be swiftly and effectively dealt with in the interests of the local community.

Mr. Straw: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. I am grateful for his support. In the spirit of consensus, I say that it is a refreshing change to hear him speaking up for a policy that is not only liberal but European.

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I welcome the long-awaited White Paper, which genuinely reaches the parts that previous White Papers could not reach. My right hon. Friend knows that in an urban constituency such as mine, at least 20,000—mostly young—people, in addition to those who live in the area, come into the town centre on a Friday evening to have a drink. It is becoming difficult for the police to handle the problems of chucking-out time and people drinking to a deadline. We shall all have reason to be grateful for the White Paper if it gets rid of the chucking-out time problem and helps to end the lager lout culture, even if it achieves nothing else.

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is chair of the all-party beer group and I am grateful to her and her colleagues for their input. I know about the problems in towns such as Reading; they are not dissimilar from those in my

constituency and many other places. I draw hon. Members' attention to the chart on page 14 of the White Paper. It shows the number of public order incidents that occur not at 10 or 11 pm but at 2 and 3 am as a result of the current inflexible closing times. As I have already said, I hope that the proposals will make a big difference to residents.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I was the victim of an assault by a drunken gang while waiting to pay for a purchase. The assailants got away with it because the closed circuit television was using dummy cameras. I therefore suggest that the Home Secretary should consider making it a condition of licensing that places that sell intoxicating liquor late at night should be obliged to have functioning CCTV in the vicinity.

Mr. Straw: That seems a good idea; I shall take it forward.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I very much welcome the White Paper. Much in it will improve our towns in particular. However, does the Home Secretary acknowledge that local authorities are worried about the additional burdens that it will place on them to police the licensing regime, especially through the night? I have recently spoken to my local authority officers, who do a good job in Luton. They are worried that additional responsibilities will need extra resources. Will my right hon. Friend consult them?

Mr. Straw: In an appendix, we set out our best estimate. It can be only an estimate of the costs of the change for different parts of the system: business, local authorities and others. As I said, we estimate that it should produce savings for business of approximately £190 million a year. Of course I accept that local authorities must be given proper resources for any additional function that they take on.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Home Secretary said that he will invite responses by the end of July, but how flexible is he about whether licensing magistrates or local authorities make such decisions? Has he considered the possibility that one local authority may decide that it does not want pubs to open after 11 pm, while a neighbouring local authority will decide that it is willing for many pubs to open after 11 pm? Is there not a danger of a drift of people from one authority to another, perhaps by car, thus encouraging drink driving? That might be avoided if the decisions were left to local licensing magistrates rather than a political entity.

Mr. Straw: I have already tried to explain why we believe that, on balance, local authorities are best placed to make such decisions. We are open to argument on our proposals in the White Paper. I accept that some issues are matters of fine judgment, and I have tried to spell out some of the considerations.

There is a balance between what we should set out nationally and local discretion. The hon. Gentleman may find that one resort town has decided to cater for one sort of market and another for a different one. Blackpool and Morecambe offer markedly different attractions. Long may that difference continue.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does the Home Secretary agree that alcohol is the hardest of all hard drugs? It kills 45,000 people every year, is involved in half all crimes of violence and abuse and is more toxic and addictive than all illegal drugs. His statement is courageous and rational. When will he apply those qualities to his policies on all other drugs? His statement and his reaction to the Runciman report leave him open to the accusation that he is hard on a soft drug and soft on hard drugs.

Mr. Straw: I did not think that the compliment would continue to the end of my hon. Friend's contribution and I was not disappointed. Alcohol, when abused, can be a very hard drug, but, taken in moderation, people can enjoy it and it is part of society's culture. I do not to believe that there should be a competition for us to determine which drug does the greatest damage. Sadly, for some people in our society, class A drugs such as heroin and cocaine cause as much damage as alcohol abuse—much more, in some cases. We should produce a sensible and proportionate approach to all the drugs that can cause harm in our society.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will the Home Secretary say a little more about breaches of the licence conditions? Will those in the first instance, particularly administrative or comparatively trivial failures, be dealt with by local authorities and only serious cases go to the criminal system and the magistrates courts? Is he satisfied that he can form a reasonable distinction between the two?

Mr. Straw: Such breaches would initially go to the local authority, but we have drawn an important distinction between the licensing of premises and personal licences, which will be portable. The proposal is that they should last 10 years and then be renewed. There would be a system of endorsements similar to that which applies to road traffic offences—depending on the severity of the offence committed by a licence holder—including the possibility of either immediate disqualification for some flagrant breach or what amounts to a totting-up procedure.

Mrs. Sylvia Heal (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): As a former licensing magistrate, I welcome my right hon. Friend's proposals and anything that will simplify the complex matter of licences. No doubt members of the Magistrates Association will submit their views to him, but can he reassure me on two points? Will licence applications continue to be heard in magistrates courts in public? Most benches, my own included, regularly inspect licensed premises for security of spirits and standards of cleanliness. Will those continue?

Mr. Straw: The answer to the first question is yes. Hearings would have to be public; it would be wrong for them to be private. If the local authorities take over responsibility for issuing licences as we propose, they will also take on responsibility for inspection. We believe that we have been able to reduce the regulatory burden on business by ensuring that if there is a single licensing system, there can be a single inspection system as well.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Home Secretary aware that it veritably warms the cockles of my heart to hear him, as a socialist, elevate for once the cause of personal liberty above that of nanny-state paternalism? Although he is undoubtedly wise and circumspect to say that he will take into account all representations that

[Mr. John Bercow]

he receives, will he nevertheless confirm that in pursuing liberalisation, clarity, consistency and choice will be his watchwords?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the compliment, which I take genuinely in the spirit in which it is intended.

Mr. Bercow: It will not happen often.

Mr. Straw: I realise that. As a socialist, my aim in life is to secure a safe, just and tolerant society in which law-abiding people have the maximum liberty to pursue their lives as they wish. If they are not law abiding, different considerations apply. I think that I endorse what the hon. Gentleman said in the second part of his question.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Like my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, the last thing I want to be is a party-pooper, but I share the concerns of many of my constituents, as expressed through the Wimbledon Society, the Wimbledon Union of Residents Associations and Wimbledon Civic Forum, about the severe proliferation of pubs and restaurants in the area. Will he confirm that, as well as giving residents associations and other amenity groups more influence over individual licensing applications, the new legislation will strengthen their hand in shaping the overall balance of shops, recreational and other civic amenities in their areas?

Mr. Straw: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns, and he has told me about the particular problems of Wimbledon on several occasions outside the House. What he says about those problems underlines the fact that the current arrangements are not working properly and need reform. That is why we have presented these proposals. I hope very much that the new system will help to ensure that residents, including those in the Wimbledon Civic Forum, can shape the policy and approach on licensing. I do not see how we could get to a position in which central Government determined the number of outlets available. That must be a matter for the market to determine, and the market is changing all the time. We must ensure that the market is properly regulated, and that the needs of local residents and the police to keep order are properly balanced against the demands of the business concerned.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Every time I have been on a police patrol late at night, it is clear that problems come from a small number of premises and a hard core of thoroughly tiresome people. They are well known to the police and to magistrates. How will the wider public be better served if the experience of the magistrates is not taken into account when a license is considered?

Mr. Straw: The experience of magistrates will be available to the local community. We will certainly consider whether there should be a representative of the magistrates on the licensing committee. This is a matter of balance and fine judgment. I have already made it clear that magistrates will be involved whether the appeal is to the Crown court, as we propose, or to a different tribunal.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that trouble typically arises from a small number of premises. Part of the present difficulty is that the only power available to magistrates is to remove the licence altogether, and that can take many months. The White Paper proposes that an officer of the rank of inspector or above should have a power to close premises for 24 hours on his or her own volition when faced with a disorderly situation—just as the fire authority can peremptorily close premises—and for there to be an appeal to magistrates or the local authority as appropriate. This and other changes that we propose should make a big difference in controlling the minority of premises and drinkers who cause almost all the trouble.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): From my right hon. Friend's statement, I understand that working men's clubs will continue to enjoy their special status. That being so, would he consider requiring a link between their special status and their conversion into either working women's and men's clubs or working people's clubs?

Mr. Forth: Oh, please.

Mrs. Cryer: This is serious. A club at Silsden in my constituency has used every trick in the book to keep women off its committee. That is not only sexist but undemocratic, and I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would comment on it. Such a measure would certainly have the support of the women in Silsden and many of my hon. Friends.

Mr. Straw: The proposition is for there to be special status for clubs. It would not be a personal licence, because of the club committee. Non-profit making clubs would be licensed—the premises would be licensed. The provisions that I have announced in respect of children would apply to children consuming alcohol whether in clubs or in any other licensed premises.

We will take my hon. Friend's main point into account in the consultation. I do not doubt that there will be some interesting debates when the Bill is before the House.

Madam Speaker: We shall leave it until then. Thank you.

Personal Statement

4.15 pm

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): On Monday 27 March, at the conclusion of the Budget debate, I made some remarks regarding taxation of petrol without reminding the House that I had a registered interest as an adviser to an oil-producing company. It was an oversight, for which I apologise to the House.

Points of Order

4.16 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. This morning, the Government published the Competition Commission's report on car pricing. The Secretary of State also announced the Government's response to the report in a 10-page press release, and has tabled statutory instruments to implement that response. All that, and no ministerial statement. Is this not yet another example of the Government's treating the House with contempt, and of the Secretary of State's refusing to answer questions about issues of enormous importance to the car industry and the country as a whole?

Madam Speaker: I understand that this is a complicated issue, and that technology broke down. I ask Dr. Howells to explain to the House the handling of the issue.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Today's release of the Competition Commission's report on the supply of new motor cars was undertaken in line with previous Governments' statements involving market-sensitive material. It was decided to lay the report in Parliament at 11 am today, and simultaneously to inform the stock exchange and release it to the media.

In the event, there was a technical problem at the stock exchange, which meant that publication time had to be delayed. Because the embargo time for the media lapsed, details of the report began to be published before the notice was released on the stock exchange. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry therefore decided to release the report to the media at the same time as it was laid in Parliament, at 12.50 this afternoon. He provided a detailed answer, as the Government's response to the report, at 3.30 pm.

We make no apologies for taking action to ensure that consumers get a better deal when it comes to buying cars in this country. Ordinary families are paying over £1 billion more than they should be paying, and we intend to do something about it.

On behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry, I apologise unreservedly for any discourtesy that may have been shown to the House this morning.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is a gentle point of order, with, I confess, a whiff of grievance.

During Home Office questions today, it took 21 minutes to deal with one question. Once upon a time, the House got through 30 or 35 questions in a session. Part of the reason was that, if a controversial issue was involved, the Leader of the Opposition or the shadow Minister tabled a question by private notice. If there are to be long and important exchanges on fraught issues, should not the Procedure Committee reflect on the possibility of using the private notice question device, rather than making it impossible for us to get beyond Question 12?

As I said, I have a grievance: I tabled Question 15, on the difficult issue of Hilda Murrell. Others, however, were also disappointed.

Madam Speaker: It had not gone unnoticed by me that the hon. Gentleman's question was Question 15. That certainly should have been reached. As for Question 4, the hon. Gentleman is quite right: on finding that a question of that nature has been tabled, the Secretary of State often prefers to answer it at the end of Question Time, thus making the answer into a form of statement.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) decided, rightly in my view, to use her entire allocation of three questions on Question 4. That was quite proper, and quite in order. The issue was the dispersal of asylum seekers, a highly interesting and contentious issue, in the country and in the House. It was quite right that there was a good exchange across the Floor of the House.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is clear from a report published last week that the Government are cutting aid to the people of Ethiopia and Mozambique while increasing support for the Government of Zimbabwe, who are engaged in ethnic cleansing. Have you received a request from the Secretary of State for International Development to come to the House and explain these baffling decisions, which, on the face of it, are extraordinary and unjustifiable? I think that the people of this country need an explanation.

Madam Speaker: There has been no request by the Secretary of State for International Development to make a statement on that issue. I believe that the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs is answering questions tomorrow and that three questions will be reached on Zimbabwe, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that the House provides ample time for Adjournment debates of half an hour and an hour and a half, when such an interesting issue can be debated. The Minister would be there and would be required to give some answers and explanation.

Orders of the Day

Nuclear Safeguards Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Dr. Kim Howells): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill will provide the Government with the necessary powers to implement a strengthened nuclear safeguards system in the United Kingdom by bringing into effect an additional protocol to our existing nuclear safeguards agreement with the European Atomic Energy Community and the International Atomic Energy Agency. That will fulfil the UK's commitment to help to strengthen the effectiveness of the international system for detecting clandestine nuclear activities in non-nuclear weapons states.

May I explain a little of the background to the Bill? After the Gulf war, Iraq was found to have been pursuing a clandestine nuclear weapons programme, even though it had in force a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the agency. In response to that discovery, the international community agreed that there was a need to strengthen the international nuclear safeguards system by giving the agency additional information and rights of access to nuclear facilities and to other relevant locations. States throughout the world are negotiating and signing legally binding additional protocols with the agency to provide it with that information and with those rights.

To date, additional protocols for 48 states have been signed. Eight have entered into force. Like most states, the UK needs to put legislation in place to ensure that we can fulfil our obligations under our additional protocol.

The UK additional protocol was signed in Vienna on 22 September 1998, along with the additional protocols for France and for the 13 non-nuclear weapons state members of the European Union. Our additional protocol requires the UK to provide information to the agency about nuclear and nuclear-related activities carried out for, or with, non-nuclear weapons states.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): If it is a matter of any importance at all, how can the Minister explain the considerable time lapse between the signing in September 1998 and the introduction of the Bill now, well into 2000?

Dr. Howells: The right hon. Gentleman, whose defence of liberty I always admire, as he knows, prevented the Bill when it was in another form—a private Member's Bill—from being brought forward perfectly properly under the rules of the House. I am now attempting to put matters right.

The information that we provide, along with that gathered from other states, will enable the agency to draw up a comprehensive picture of nuclear activity in non-nuclear weapons states. That will enhance the agency's ability to detect signs of suspicious activity that may be indicative of clandestine nuclear programmes and to act as a strong deterrent to the development of such programmes.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Minister will understand that the Bill is of great concern to the House, albeit not to Labour Members, all of whom seem to have disappeared to the Tea Room. He is ensuring, rightly, that the UK will comply with the agency. However, what about countries such as North Korea or Iraq? How many other rogue states are there around the world that have nuclear capability, but are refusing to sign the protocol?

Dr. Howells: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. However, I am glad to say that I am the elected Member for Pontypridd, not for Seoul or for any other part of the world, and that I cannot answer for them.

We need the Bill's legal powers to enable the United Kingdom to fulfil its obligations under the new additional protocol. The Bill's core elements can be found in clauses 2 and 5.

The first element—clause 2—is required because much of the information that the additional protocol requires the United Kingdom to pass to the agency will not originate with the Government. Therefore, the clause enables people to give relevant information to the Secretary of State, unrestricted by any obligation of confidentiality or limit on disclosure that would otherwise inhibit them from doing so, although any such obligations and limits will still apply for other purposes. It is anticipated that the great majority of the information required by the agency from the United Kingdom will be given to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry voluntarily by those who have it.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Although I appreciate that the Minister is the hon. Member for Pontypridd, rather than for Seoul, nevertheless he is today moving the Second Reading of a Bill that would implement an international protocol to an internationally agreed nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Surely he could tell the House how many other countries, to date, have signed up to the additional protocol. I am sure that that is information that the Foreign Office is bound to supply.

Dr. Howells: I fear that the right hon. Gentleman has come into the Chamber a little late. As I said, 48 states have signed up to the protocol and four have enacted it. We want to be the next in line.

In the event that a person is unwilling to provide information that the Government need to fulfil a United Kingdom obligation under the additional protocol, there obviously has to be a means of compelling that person to do so. Therefore, clause 2 also enables the Secretary of State to serve a notice on someone, with a criminal sanction for non-compliance, requiring him or her to give relevant information.

Clause 5 is the Bill's second core element. The clause gives inspectors designated by the agency a right to enter certain locations in accordance with the additional protocol and to conduct in those places specific activities that the additional protocol requires to be permitted. Those activities are essentially designed to check information that we and other countries have provided to the agency. Although, we would usually expect access by agency inspectors to be granted on a voluntarily basis, the Bill makes it a criminal offence to obstruct inspectors in performing their functions or to interfere with anything placed on land by an inspector in the course of those functions.

It is envisaged that visits from agency inspectors under clause 5 will occur mostly at the sites of the major nuclear companies. All those companies have expressed their support for the new measures. The precise activities that may be conducted by the agency inspectors under clause 5 will depend largely on the location in question and the reason for the access.

Mr. Forth: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: I shall certainly give way in a moment.

The activities that may be performed include, for example, visual observation, collection of environmental samples, use of radiation detection and measuring devices, and, of course, examination of records.

Mr. Forth: The Minister has said that the proprietors or operators of what he has called nuclear sites have said that they are content with the provisions of the Bill and the protocol. However, does he accept that the wide powers given, particularly those in clause 5, go much further than that, and that he therefore cannot make any presumption about a general consent or relaxation about the wide powers in the Bill? What measures have the Government taken to assess, outside the rather narrow nuclear fraternity, opinion on the powers given in the Bill?

Dr. Howells: We have made our intentions abundantly clear for a long time. We have not heard of any serious worries from any quarter. I shall try to deal with some of the problems that I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is keen to highlight.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman's oration. I regret only that he has such a poor audience on the Labour Benches. Has he been overwhelmed by support from outside bodies for the apartheid that the Bill creates between authorised officers of the British Government, who have to satisfy a justice of the peace before they can invade private property, and international agencies, who have a fiat to trample over the private property of United Kingdom citizens with no justification or explanation?

Dr. Howells: No.

Clause 5, Madam Speaker, gives effect to one of the key obligations under the protocol. It is a fundamental aspect of the protocol that, if a state has provided information to the agency—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I should have said Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a problem with advancing age. Agency inspectors must have a right of access to confirm the completeness and accuracy of the information provided, subject only to the conditions provided for in the additional protocol.

The remaining clauses are secondary to clauses 2 and 5. I shall outline them briefly so that hon. Members understand the overall structure of the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the Minister for his confirmation a moment ago that he had not been overwhelmed by support for the apartheid that the Bill creates. Has he been overwhelmed by strong opposition to the authoritarian character of his proposals?

Dr. Howells: No.

Clause 3 is necessary to enable the Secretary of State to identify those from whom he requires information. It enables him to make regulations requiring persons—that includes companies and other bodies, such as universities, as well as individuals—to inform him if they carry out certain types of activity or have certain information that he may need.

Clause 4 enables an officer authorised by the Secretary of State, having obtained a warrant from a justice of the peace—I know that hon. Members are concerned about this—to enter any premises in the United Kingdom to search for information that has been required by the Secretary of State in a notice under clause 2, but that the person served with the notice has failed or refused to provide. That is envisaged as a last resort power, but it is needed because a power to prosecute does not guarantee that the necessary information will be provided. The clause also covers entry when documents or other things containing information needed by the Secretary of State are at risk of being destroyed, altered or disposed of, so preventing the Secretary of State from obtaining information.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I am doing my best to keep up on this technical matter. The Minister said that the clause gives the Secretary of State the power to ask for information, but if the company concerned will not tell him, how on earth does he know what to ask for?

Dr. Howells: That is a good point. Hon. Members should not look smug. Looking smug and grunting would not have sorted out the problem of arms to Iraq, still less the manufacture of nuclear triggers and other components that could put the lives of a great many people, including British soldiers, under threat.

Mr. Wilshire: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister has just said that somebody had been grunting. Could you advise me who it was?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I did not hear anybody grunting.

Dr. Howells: This is a very old building. I agree with you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Clause 6 protects information obtained under the Bill or the additional protocol. It prohibits the disclosure of certain types of such information except for certain purposes or in certain circumstances, and sets out penalties for disclosure in breach of those limits. The clause is aimed primarily at civil servants who deal with the information to be passed to the agency or who accompany agency inspectors on visits.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): The Minister has moved on rather faster than I expected. I am still thinking about clause 5. Will he name any public bodies outside the nuclear industry that support the extraordinary powers given to an extra-national body to enter the private property of a British citizen without any appeal mechanism?

Dr. Howells: We have received no objections from any manufacturing company or private individual. There was

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an extensive debate on the matter in another place, and their Lordships were satisfied with the assurances that they were given and with the text of the Bill.

Clause 7 makes it an offence knowingly or recklessly to give false or misleading information under the Bill. Clause 8—

Mr. Fabricant: How would clause 7 affect British Nuclear Fuels Ltd?

Dr. Howells: I am here to talk about the work that goes on within Britain in various manufacturing plants, which is done in co-operation with a non-nuclear weapon state. I am not aware that British Nuclear Fuels is involved in any such deal. It would seem that that issue is outside the remit of the Bill.

Clause 8 provides persons authorised by the Secretary of State, having obtained a warrant from a justice of the peace, with the power to search premises for evidence of an offence under the Bill.

Clause 9 sets out the penalties for failing to comply with various provisions of the Bill or interfering with things done under the Bill. Generally, such offences are to be punishable in a magistrates court by a fine up to the statutory maximum, which is £5,000, or after a jury trial by an unlimited fine. However, knowingly or recklessly giving false information under the Bill is to be punishable in the magistrates court by a fine of up to the statutory maximum or, after a jury trial, by an unlimited fine or up to two year's imprisonment, or both.

Clause 9 deals also with a case where a corporate body or a Scottish partnership is found to have committed an offence under the Bill and allows persons of authority in the body, or partners, to be charged if they were involved in the commission of the offence.

The remaining clauses set out how a notice under the Act may be served; amend the Act, implementing the original safeguards agreement of 1976 to bring it in line with the Bill and with corresponding provisions of the Chemical Weapons Act 1996; and deal with commencement, territorial extent and the short title.

I fully expect those who are affected by the new measures to co-operate with them voluntarily. Indeed, we are not aware of any prosecutions under the Act implementing the original safeguards agreement of 1976 and the Nuclear Safeguards and Electricity (Finance) Act 1978. Those concerned have always acted responsibly and co-operated with the Department voluntarily.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): In essence, the purpose of the Bill is to give powers to the International Atomic Energy Agency to enter premises without a warrant from a justice of the peace so that the IAEA will have the same powers in the rogue states such as North Korea and Iraq. Is it not odd that those states are not signatories to the additional protocol? We are implementing it in the expectation and hope that those countries will sign it and that its powers will be implemented in those states. What progress has been made in persuading those countries to sign the protocol?

Dr. Howells: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, this has always been an international effort. If we do not sign the protocol, how can we expect rogue countries to do so? That is complete nonsense. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that the Conservative party is opposed to these agreements, he should tell us. In the meantime—I very much look forward to his speech—the Government will try to set a good example by signing up to additional protocols.

Mr. Gibb: The Opposition support these measures and give the Government and the agency the benefit of the doubt on the issue. However, I asked the Minister for information to help the House in scrutinising the Bill. Where are we internationally in terms of persuading those countries to sign the protocol? The Minister should know, because he is introducing the Bill.

Dr. Howells: As I have said, many countries have already signed up and the agenda will be taken further by a conference on 24 April. We are making progress, but it is important that this country sets a good example.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: No, I shall try to finish now. Without a mechanism for compelling people to provide the relevant information to the Government, and for ensuring a right of access for agency inspectors, we could not guarantee compliance with the United Kingdom's obligations under the additional protocols, in the—albeit unlikely—event that someone was not prepared to co-operate voluntarily. As I have said, we do not so far have an example of someone refusing to co-operate.

It is also worth emphasising that the burden on business of the new measures is minimal. *[Interruption.]* A regulatory impact assessment prepared by my Department showed that the estimated cost for businesses likely to be affected by the new safeguards measure would be around £150,000 in the first year. That is minimal compared with the cost of existing safeguard measures, which is more than £10 million a year for BNFL alone. The cost to small businesses involved in manufacturing or consultancy work which would be caught by the proposed legislation would be a few thousand pounds.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) asked how many countries have enacted such legislation, but can the Minister tell us whether the United States of America has ratified the protocol?

Dr. Howells: No, the US is considering ratification at the moment. The additional protocols still have to be taken through Congress.

It is worth repeating that, without the mechanism for compelling people to provide the relevant information to the Government and for ensuring a right of access to agency inspectors, we could not guarantee compliance with the United Kingdom's obligations under the additional protocols in the unlikely event that someone was not prepared to co-operate voluntarily. That is very important. I would also emphasise that the burden on business of the new measures will be minimal. Hon. Members were talking among themselves when I mentioned that point earlier, so I wished to repeat it.

I note that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has tabled an amendment that questions the Bill's compatibility with the Human Rights Act 1998, but I assure him that the Government are committed to upholding the principles of individual human rights set out in the European convention on human rights and in that Act. In drafting the Bill, careful consideration has been given to ensuring that its measures uphold the principles set out in the convention and the Government are satisfied that the Bill's provisions are fully compatible with those principles. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman is aware that the issue was discussed during consideration of the Bill in the other place. We took the opportunity then to consider the point in detail once more, and we are satisfied that nothing in the Bill is inconsistent with the convention. However, I look forward to hearing the right hon. Gentleman's misgivings on that point.

Mr. Forth: It will take a long time.

Dr. Howells: I have no doubt of that, and I am fully prepared for it. I hope that, in the light of my remarks, the right hon. Gentleman is satisfied on that point and is reassured that the matter has been given the careful consideration that it deserves.

Mr. Forth I am grateful to the Minister for identifying the modest contribution that I have made so far, and I shall make a more substantial contribution later. He may be surprised to hear that I am not prepared to accept the general reassurances that he has given. He will know that there is great difference in substance between the rights granted under clause 4, and those granted under clause 5. I would accept his reassurances about clause 4, but clause 5 gives us all much greater concern.

How can the Minister square the rights in the convention and the Human Rights Act 1998 with the untrammelled rights that would be given to foreigners to trample over British citizens' property and possessions?

Dr. Howells: The right hon. Gentleman is right to identify clause 5 as the key provision in the Bill. Unlike clause 4, it does not require a warrant to be issued before access to premises is sought. A requirement to obtain a warrant is considered an appropriate control on the exercise of a general power to enter a premises, and especially on a power to search for items or information or to collect evidence for possible use in a prosecution. Clauses 4 and 8 contain general search powers of that sort, and those powers are exercisable only on the granting of a warrant. However, as the right hon. Gentleman says, clause 5 does not provide a power to enter premises and conduct a search, nor one to enter premises and carry out activities in general terms.

The agency's rights under clause 5 relate only to entering premises to conduct certain tightly defined activities. As such, a warrant provision in clause 5 is not considered necessary or appropriate.

I hope that, in the light of these remarks, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will reconsider his amendment. I also hope that the Opposition will give their wholehearted support to this new and important non-proliferation measure. Germany, Spain and the Netherlands have succeeded in completing their legislative procedures and are in a position to ratify their additional protocols. We must now focus on our efforts to ensure that we can do likewise.

I emphasise the importance of making good progress towards putting the legislation in place before Easter. On 24 April, the review conference of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty starts in New York. Last year, the United Kingdom, along with our EU partners, made a public commitment to make every effort to conclude our ratification procedures for entry into force of the additional protocol in time for that conference.

The conference will be an important event for the United Kingdom, which is a leading proponent of nuclear non-proliferation and a state with nuclear weapons. We hope to be able to report that significant progress has been made towards the objective.

Mr. Maclean: Has the Minister's Department had discussions with the Association of Chief Police Officers or the police service about clause 5(5), which would put a British police constable under an obligation to give help or assistance, or to use force, under the orders of a foreign inspector? If so, what was the view of the British police on the matter?

Dr. Howells: Yes, I believe that extensive discussions have taken place. I hope that Conservative Members are not about to raise the spectre of foreign inspectors trampling through Britain. I remind them that those inspectors may well be British—indeed, they may be English. We are talking about an international agency, and we have many distinguished inspectors.

I am sure that Conservative Members would love to throw a net over all the inspectors and call them filthy foreigners. However, that would be a big mistake, and they must be very careful: this country has played a great part in the International Atomic Energy Agency, and in ensuring that our expertise, built up over many years, is used to best effect.

Mr. Keetch: Will the Minister agree that rhetoric in the House, even when the banter is good natured, could be used by other countries to justify their exclusion of their foreigners? We should be careful that representatives of the United Nations and other international bodies in which this country plays a leading role are not simply called foreigners.

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman has expressed this far better than I could. Those are the words that Saddam Hussein used to drive out International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. I assume that Conservative Members will not behave in a similar way.

Mr. Wilshire: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: No, I am about to finish.

To sum up, let me say that enacting the Bill will represent a clear demonstration of the United Kingdom's strong commitment to nuclear non-proliferation. As a nuclear weapons state, it is incumbent on the United Kingdom to take a strong lead on the issue as a tangible illustration to the European community and the world that

[Dr. Howells]

we do not procrastinate when it comes to our non-proliferations obligations. I commend the Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that Madam Speaker did not select the amendment that is on the Order Paper.

4.51 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I congratulate the Minister on setting out the Government's position very clearly. The Bill is one of those measures that appear relatively straightforward and uncontroversial on the surface, particularly to any Government wishing to fulfil their international obligations. The logic behind it seems compelling. The United Kingdom, under successive Administrations, has had a good record in this respect, and Conservative Members want us to continue to enjoy that reputation.

That is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) objected to the Government's trying to slide this very important issue through as a private Member's Bill. We do not want to send a message to the rest of the world that we regard this measure as so unimportant that we will just stick it through as a private Member's Bill. Frankly, that is just not good enough, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has been successful, in that the Bill is being debated in the House and will now go through the proper procedures and become a proper Government Bill in the fullness of time.

I have to confess one minor worry—the Minister said that he would like to see this done by Easter. I am not sure whether the procedures of the House are such that that can happen, given that the Bill has to be considered in Committee and on Report; I am unaware that the Report stage is to occur on Good Friday, for instance. Wherever possible, we wish to help and to expedite the proceedings.

Mr. Fabricant: I wonder whether my hon. Friend has another worry. Was he not as concerned as I was that when the Minister referred to the United Kingdom's international policy on North Korea, he thought that Seoul was the capital of North Korea.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend, as always, makes his point in his own inimitable fashion. I can understand that as the Minister was born in south Wales, and does not travel very far, he may get muddled about where Seoul is. I suffer from the same problem.

As some of my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, not every country seems to share the justifiable ambitions of this Government and the others who have so far ratified and implemented the treaty. I think that this issue is a bit like the issue of dog licences. Right hon. and hon. Members may wonder how on earth I can draw such a parallel. During earlier Sessions of Parliament, the House has debated dog licences ad nauseam. Eventually, it dawned on people that the good guys will get dog licences, look after their dogs and make sure that they have a tag, while the bad guys will not. We should be focusing our attention and efforts on the bad guys.

The same applies to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons which came into force in 1970, and the subsequent efforts to control the spread of nuclear weapons technology. One of the principal aims of the treaty has been to try to prevent the diversion of peaceful research and development of nuclear energy into the development and production of nuclear weapons. We all say amen to that. States that did not have nuclear weapons have been encouraged—and cajoled in some cases—to enter into agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency to inhibit them from going down the nuclear path.

Like the four other declared nuclear weapons states, this country has entered voluntary safeguard agreements with the IAEA under which inspectors have been granted access to our facilities for the purpose of monitoring the production of potentially fissile materials and for tracing them from the time of their production.

Since 1991, we and our partners—together with other countries—have been engaged in tightening up the systems and safeguards, resulting in the additional protocol that we signed with the IAEA in September 1998 and to which the Bill gives full force.

Not to put too fine a point on it, we have been one of the good boys—or, as the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) would have it, one of the good persons—in terms of meeting international obligations. Others have not. No one needs reminding of the IAEA's failure to detect the development of clandestine weapons programmes in Iraq and North Korea. Iraq was a member of the IAEA. India and Pakistan were and are members, but that has not stopped them developing their own nuclear weapons in breach of their agreements with the IAEA. It may be that Libya is going down the same route.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) is worried about the Russian nuclear submarines that are rusting away in the Arctic circle, adding steadily to all the environmental pollution that has occurred there.

I am a little sceptical about the effectiveness of marching to the drumbeat of the IAEA. However, it is the only show in town, and it is important that we demonstrate our willingness to live up to our obligations and to repeat the commitment made by our Conservative colleagues in another place generally to support the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: While it is instructive and reassuring to know that, under clause 4(7), no constable shall search someone of the opposite sex, what recourse does a private individual have against the improper use of powers contained in clause 5? If the answer is that there is no formal recourse against an inappropriate use of the clause, how has the Minister been able to satisfy himself that the Bill is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998?

Mr. Page: It is a matter of deep regret to me that I am not the Minister in control of these matters. If I were, I am sure we would have proceeded with sweetness and light, without all of the concerns expressed by my right hon. and hon. Friends. I shall touch fleetingly on that subject later; I am sure that the Minister will give crystal-clear answers that will satisfy everybody, and we will all live happily ever after.

There are questions which need answering. The Bill extends the powers of the Secretary of State to require information or records to be kept. Where it is suspected that offences may have been committed under the Bill, it will give his authorised officers and inspectors from the IAEA enhanced rights of entry to the premises and business of corporations, and even into the homes of private individuals, in search of information. That extends even to the colonies of the UK.

It would be helpful if the Minister could explain precisely to what range of installations the record-keeping requirements set out in clause 2 will apply. Some facilities, such as the nuclear reprocessing facilities at Sellafield or the nuclear power stations at Dungeness or Bradwell, are obvious. It is unclear how far university research facilities may be affected. Cambridge university was recently fined a small amount for losing track of nuclear material handled in its laboratories. I assume—the Minister can correct me if I am wrong—that the Bill will apply to university facilities.

Will the Minister discuss the cost implications of the new requirements? He has fallen into the trap of dismissing the sums of money involved as small ones. That shows that the Government do not understand business. As the Bill passed through the other place, we were told:

> The cost to small businesses involved in manufacturing or consultancy work which would be caught by the proposed legislation would be in the order of a few thousand pounds per year.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 607, c. 777.]

It was implied that, as the sum was just a few thousand, we need not worry. As one who knows a small amount about the small business sector, I can say that such sums do matter. A few thousand here or there, or a few regulations here or there, can put a perfectly viable business on the borderline. I wish that the Minister would be clearer on the impact of costs on our smaller businesses.

What requirements will the record-keeping organisation have to meet? Guidance will be issued by the DTI's safeguards office following discussions between the IAEA and the Government. New recording procedures may be necessary, but the Government have given little indication of the period over which such novel demands might be introduced. The House can reasonably ask for that information before we accept clause 2.

From the point of view of the small business—the Conservative party is the small business man's friend—we know that the extra burdens and duties imposed by new regulations will mean that, instead of getting on with running a business, small business men or women will be consigned to filling in lots of forms to satisfy the Government's insatiable desire for information.

Dr. Howells: Will the hon. Gentleman name for me one or two firms that have ever complained about the onerous burden that he so beautifully describes?

Mr. Maclean: They have not seen the regulations yet.

Mr. Page: The voices off mean that I need offer no response to that. May I remind the Minister of what I have just said? His Department has given little indication of the period over which novel demands may be introduced. What extra compliance will be required? Until businesses know that, they cannot know whether to complain. The Minister is putting the cart before the horse. I have absolutely no doubt that when some organisations read the new demands, they will say, "Not another burden on business; we can add it to the record of 1999 when more burdens were placed on businesses than in any other year of this country's existence."

I shall move on because I do not wish to be accused of delaying matters. May I request further information on the requirements of clause 2(7)? What will the Minister's legal advisers regard as a "reasonable" excuse by a person who fails to comply with a notice requiring certain records to be kept or retained? I recently served on the Committee that considered the Postal Services Bill, in which the word "reasonable" was discussed several times, but I am still waiting for the Minister in charge of that Bill to produce a definition. What would or would not be justifiable as an excuse? Would a failure by the safeguards officer of the DTI to supply a copy of guidance be an excuse?

I am also interested in the regulations that the Secretary of State may make under clause 3, which has one of those lovely, cryptic openings so beloved of parliamentary draftsmen. It states:

> The Secretary of State may make regulations requiring persons of any description specified in the regulations to inform him that they are of such a description and to give such supplementary particulars as may be so specified.

That shows that Sir Humphrey is alive and well and living in the DTI.

After several hours of trying to work out what that provision meant, I decided that, in plain language, it puts the onus on individuals and organisations to identify themselves to the Secretary of State. However, if they are not aware that they should be thus identified—if individuals have not been informed by their employers that they fall into that category—how are those with only a peripheral involvement in such matters to proceed? How will they be clearly identified? Will every junior lab technician at nuclear power plants be included? It would be helpful if the Minister could put some practical flesh on that point in his reply. Obviously, the more extensive his response now, the less will be the need for further debate and questioning on other occasions. Any information gathered about such individuals or organisations must be passed on to the IAEA according to subsection (2)(a) of the clause. What security procedures has the Department agreed with the IAEA to ensure that such information remains confidential? Will the Minister assure us that the agency's procedures are as good—if not better—than those operating in the UK?

Mr. Fabricant: Is my hon. Friend as astonished as I am by the fact that the United Kingdom will sign that important protocol—if the Bill is passed—but that countries such as the Ukraine, North Korea, Libya, Israel, India, Pakistan, Belarus, Iraq and Iran have gone nowhere near it?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend again makes an important point. Not only am I not the Minister in charge of the Bill and thus unable to answer such questions—as I said before—but I am not in charge of all the countries that he mentioned. I hope that when all our questions are answered and we sign the protocol, we can encourage,

[Mr. Page]

by example, some of those countries to tread the path of righteousness and truth so as to bring a little security and stability to the world.

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend referred to righteousness and truth. Is he therefore impressed by the fact that the Holy See has signed up to the additional protocol?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend has upset me, because I had planned to devote a considerable part of my short introduction to the splendid example set by the Holy See in the matter. I am not too sure about its nuclear capability and capacity.

Mr. Robathan: The ultimate deterrent.

Mr. Page: The Holy See offers a splendid and commendable example to which I hope that the Minister will draw attention in his remarks.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): A different sort of missal.

Mr. Page: If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, rather than making remarks from a sedentary position, I—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There have been too many sedentary interventions. I remind the House that the subject is extremely serious.

Mr. Page: Thank you for your support and protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am a firm supporter of nuclear power. It is one of the cleanest forms of energy and it should be more widely used in this country. However, because of the way in which that power can be corrupted and wrongly used, it is vital that information about it does not pass into the wrong hands—certainly not to members of active terrorist organisations.

I can think of no reasonable objection to creating powers to enable the Secretary of State to obtain information or records that have been withheld or not supplied and are required under the notice that he has issued. It is not clear why the power of entry in clause 4 to search for information that should have been supplied to the Secretary of State should be exercised at any reasonable hour.

Again, that lovely word "reasonable" is used, and I hope that the Minister will explain what that means. What is reasonable? Is it reasonable to enter business premises or a private dwelling between 7 am and 11 pm but not after 11 pm? Is the dawn raid no more? Will there no longer be a knock at the door at 5.30 am? I would be grateful if the Minister—who can seek advice from all his sources—could advise us what is meant by reasonable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), ever conscious of the need to have balance in our lives, has already pointed out the difficulties of providing officers of each sex to do a search. Every search team will need a woman police constable so that the job can be done properly.

Mr. Robathan: This is an important point. I accept what the Minister has said about the search procedures, but if it is so important to discover illegally held material on somebody's person, it is a little worrying that the absence of a woman police officer might mean that the person hiding that material would get away with it. Surely we must decide whether the needs of international nuclear disarmament should take priority over political correctness.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend endorses the comment that I just made. The wording of the Bill means that a search will have to include male and female officers if it is to be effective. That is right, and nobody should be given the chance to evade the requirements of such important legislation.

Mr. Keetch: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that in all forms of search by all agencies in the United Kingdom there is always a male and a female officer present? Is he not aware that if a person to be searched were of the opposite sex to the officers conducting the search, there is no reason why that person could not be held until an officer of the same sex was available? Surely he should move on from this point?

Mr. Page: I am more than prepared to move on; I was saying that the Bill covers that point—and I do not find that objectionable or offensive. The hon. Gentleman can make his own points about other aspects of parliamentary activity and legislation, although they would have to be in order, otherwise Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would rightly come down on him and keep him in line.

As the Government made clear in another place, clause 5 is central to the Bill, and a number of my hon. Friends have homed in on that point. It has been made abundantly clear that the IAEA is not, and never has been, party to the European convention on human rights, and that the Government believe that the powers to be granted to IAEA inspectors to enter premises do not breach the convention. I am aware of the exchanges on that issue which took place in another place.

Nevertheless, I wonder whether the Department's confidence is entirely well founded. The extremely careful language used by Lord McIntosh of Haringey on 13 December and 24 January indicated that he anticipated potential legal challenge from UK citizens whose premises or homes might be entered by IAEA inspectors without warrants granted by justices of the peace. It was admitted in the other place that

> the courts should be able to decide for themselves whether that inconsistency—

that is, between the requirements of clauses 4 and 5 with regard to a warrant—

> was relevant to any offence with which a person was charged under the Bill—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 1349.]

Does that give the game away? Does that mean that the courts could decide that the Bill infringes the European convention on human rights? If they do, the blame will rightly lie at the Minister's feet.

Of course it is right to restrict the disclosure of information obtained from persons subject to the provisions of the Bill or the additional protocol. I understand that there are circumstances in which such information may be disclosed. There should be no difficulty if the person from whom the information has been obtained consented, as envisaged by clause 6(2).

Clearly, information that is relevant to criminal allegations or offences must be disclosed to the prosecuting authorities, but what is the position of individuals or companies affected by the disclosure of commercially sensitive information in criminal proceedings that fail? One can easily envisage a situation in which information about nuclear fuel reprocessing—for example, at Sellafield, which is a highly sensitive subject—might be of great interest and value to competitors overseas. What redress would there be for individuals or organisations found innocent of alleged offences?

The fact that many of the provisions of clause 8 duplicate those of clause 4 has already attracted comment in another place. Clause 4 determines how information may be sought, if it is not supplied to the Secretary of State, and clause 8 deals with the powers that officers authorised by the Secretary of State will have to search premises for evidence that offences have been committed.

Mr. Bercow: Given that there is some lingering uncertainty as to whether the Bill in all its aspects is compatible with the European convention on human rights, would not Ministers do us a signal service were they to publish the legal advice that they received on that point from our old friends the Government lawyers?

Mr. Page: The Minister has no doubt heard my hon. Friend's request. It would be helpful if he would consider such a kind gesture to my hon. Friend. That would also be a service to the rest of the House.

I do not apologise for making detailed points because, although we are in favour of the Bill in principle, it is necessary to make sure that the matters of concern that I have raised are satisfactorily answered and given a clear bill of health. My final detailed point arises from clause 12.

It is clear that the Bill, if enacted, will apply throughout the United Kingdom, and if Her Majesty grants an Order in Council, to the Channel Islands and Isle of Man. I am intrigued to see that it may be applied to "any colony." What explanation can the Minister offer the House for that provision? Is the development of nuclear power programmes on St. Helena or the Falkland islands imminent? I should have thought not, but this may be one of the few occasions on which the Government are thinking ahead.

I hope that the Minister can provide answers to the questions that have been put to him not only by me, but by my hon. Friends in their contributions. I hope that we can then make sure that the Bill gets a quick passage on to the statute book, showing that we are fully behind its aims and objectives.

5.19 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I support the Bill, which ratifies the additional protocol to the safeguards mandated in article 3 of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, with wider provisions covering undeclared facilities and more effective inspections. It is substantially the private Member's Bill that I introduced—Bill No. 23 of the 1998-99 Session. I am delighted that the Government have found time to take the matter forward.

I am also delighted to pay tribute to a predecessor of mine as the Member of Parliament for Putney, the noble Lord Jenkins, who is 92 years old and still speaking strongly in the other place on the cause of nuclear disarmament. He will be pleased that the Bill, although small in its way, is the way forward.

I should also point out that I succeeded as Labour candidate for Putney the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), who, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs said, will be representing the Government at the review of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty on 24 April. I am very pleased that, as the current Member of Parliament for Putney, I am able to follow in the tradition of those two very great men.

I should thank all those who helped me last year in pursuing my private Member's Bill, particularly Dr. Stephen Pullinger of the Institute for Science and International Security and Rebecca Johnson of the Acronym institute. I also thank the staff at the British embassy in Vienna and of the International Atomic Energy Agency for all their help, which enabled me fully to understand the workings of the IAEA and the need for the protocol. I also thank all-party groups that helped me to pursue the cause of ratification in Hong Kong, with the People's Republic of China, and in South Korea, in discussion with North Korea. I am grateful for the Korean ambassador's continuing support for the additional protocol.

Mr. Gibb: This is all very interesting, but why was there no requirement in clause 4 of the hon. Gentleman's private Member's Bill for Department of Trade and Industry inspectors—let alone international inspectors—to seek a search warrant from a justice of the peace?

Mr. Colman: I look forward to my hon. Friend the Minister answering that question in his winding-up speech.

Mr. Gibb: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again?

Mr. Colman: No, I should like to proceed with my speech.

In thanking the all-party British-American parliamentary group, I particularly draw attention to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). I am also grateful for the widespread support of the United States Administration—in both the House of Representatives and the Senate—for the additional protocol.

Mr. Bercow: I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman. Am I right in thinking that he has just enunciated a novel notion of parliamentary responsibility? He said to my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) that it is the responsibility of the Minister to explain the lacuna in a Back-Bench Bill.

Mr. Colman: As I pointed out at the beginning of my speech, this Bill is substantially similar to my private Member's Bill, but its provisions are now those of a Government Bill, and I therefore look forward to the Minister dealing with it.

I am pleased that the United Kingdom is the first nuclear power to proceed with ratification of the additional protocol. I originally chose to promote my Bill

[Mr. Colman]

because I was concerned that, when United Nations inspectors were ordered out of Iraq in December 1998, there appeared to be no basis for a wider approach to enable all countries across the world to proceed with establishing a standard inspection regime. I was obviously very pleased, therefore, to discover that the additional protocol had been signed on 22 September and that we were able to take matters forward. The additional protocol cannot be imposed on Iraq because of sanctions dating from the end of the Iraq war in 1991. I call on Iraq to demonstrate its openness and to sign and ratify the protocol. As has been said, there is also need for Cuba, Israel, India and Pakistan to do so.

Mr. Wilshire: I understand why the hon. Gentleman calls on Iraq to sign up to the additional protocol, but does he have any reason to believe that, were it to do so, it would be any more likely to stick to it, given that it was a signatory to the safeguard agreement in the first place?

Mr. Colman: The hon. Gentleman does not understand that the safeguard agreement that Iraq signed did not allow the International Atomic Energy Agency the right to search, as the Bill does. The reason for the additional protocol is to deal with Iraq's duplicity. When it was developing nuclear weapons, it stated that it was not doing that.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Would the hon. Gentleman have confidence that, if Iraq signed the additional protocol, the system would work if any search by the international body required an affidavit from the equivalent of a justice of the peace in Baghdad? Some hon. Members seem to proposing that.

Mr. Colman: I agree. When some hon. Members intervened on my hon. Friend the Minister, I sometimes wondered whether they were speaking for Saddam Hussein. However, I am sure that they were not.

I draw the attention of the House to the excellent work of the current inquiry of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs into weapons of mass destruction. I shall mention two of the people who have given evidence to the inquiry and who have supported my work in the past year. Professor John Simpson of the Mountbatten centre for international studies pointed out in his evidence that many new states are acceding to the non-proliferation treaty, and that it has widened. There is now the treaty of Rarotonga, which covers the south Pacific, the treaty of Bangkok, which covers south-east Asia and the treaty of Pelindaba, which covers Africa. Those treaties cover nuclear weapons-free zones, and involve more than 100 states.

Until all states have ratified the additional protocol, we cannot move to a new system of integrated safeguards. That makes it imperative that we, as one of the nuclear powers, take the lead on the matter.

Rebecca Johnson, who is executive director of the Acronym institute, stated in her evidence:

> So far, the rate of signature and ratification of the Additional Protocols has been abysmal. For Britain to have ratified before the 2000 NPT conference would be an important signal of its commitment to strengthening the safeguards regime and improving the IAEA powers for monitoring and inspecting nuclear capable states.

It has already been said that approximately 48 countries have now signed, including the main nuclear powers: the United Kingdom, the United States, the People's Republic of China, France and, on 22 March this year, Russia. So far, only eight countries have ratified. It is a pity that Euratom has not moved forward on the matter.

Earlier, the Minister and the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) mentioned the anxieties of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth).

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The right hon. Member.

Mr. Colman: I apologise. The right hon. Gentleman expressed anxiety that the Bill might contravene the European convention on human rights. That matter was fully discussed in another place and on Third Reading. Those debates are worth reading. The matter can be taken further in Committee.

I am worried that a more lenient regime might be established in this country, whereby warrants would have to be issued before inspection could take place. Such a regime would be used as a coach and horses, and would ensure that rogue states such as Iraq would continue to be able to hide the evidence. It would nullify the need and effectiveness of the additional protocol.

Mr. Page: The hon. Gentleman's point is one of the fundamental problems that worries my hon. Friends and me. The other place states that the Bill will not contravene the European convention on human rights. Nevertheless, the courts could decide that the Bill constituted an infringement. If that happened, we could be in difficulties.

Mr. Colman: We could have experienced the same problem with our land mines and chemical weapons Acts. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman suggests that we should not enter into any international treaty obligations. It is important to lead the way and not to have a less stringent inspection regime in this country for land mines, chemical weapons and nuclear weapons than elsewhere.

Mr. Page: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again and I am grateful to him for promoting me, but I am a humble hon. Member. We obviously do not want difficulties. We want things to go smoothly and sweetly and we must have as much information as possible to ensure that the proposal will not be challenged in the courts. I say that the IAEA must be able to take up those powers without infringement; he says, "It's going to be all right and we have them for the land mines and chemical treaties"—but that does not definitively answer what could be a difficult problem.

Mr. Colman: I am suggesting not that the proposal is the definitive answer, but that the matter has been examined again and again by the House in relation to similar treaty obligations. I am sure that it will be fully explored again in Committee. We must not give a signal, particularly ahead of the review of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty on 26 April, that we are against an inspection regime in this country that we would wish on other countries.

I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), who recently set up the all-party group on global security and

non-proliferation. I was pleased that not only Michael Douglas, but prominent Ministers and shadow Ministers from both sides of the House attended a recent meeting, because dealing with weapons of mass destruction has been too far down the House's agenda for far too long.

I have an important final point to make. In February, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development brought together representatives of developing countries, many of whom were benefiting or were to benefit from the debt relief provisions for which Jubilee 2000 has fought for a long time. The meeting examined their armaments budgets and considered whether they wanted to think again about the amount that they were spending. That is a legitimate way forward. The money forgone for debt relief will be diverted to poverty alleviation and we must consider whether more can be done to persuade countries to move on armaments purchases as well.

As the non-proliferation treaty review approaches, we must consider the fact that expenditure on weapons of mass destruction is largely made by developed countries in the G8 and, as Jubilee 2000 comes to its triumphant conclusion, whether we should establish a Jubilee 2002. We must bring to the top of the agenda the aim of all parties throughout the world moving forward on multilateral disarmament by dealing with weapons of mass destruction. I want the United Kingdom to take the lead and the Bill is a small step in that direction. I commend it to the House.

5.33 pm

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): As the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) said, no more important matter could be brought before the House than attempts to end the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and, especially, of nuclear weapons. I endorse his comments about the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge). I am pleased to see him in the Chamber as he has done a great deal of work not only through the all-party group, but by initiating a recent Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is surely the most important international issue facing the countries of the world and, briefly, I want to add the support of Liberal Democrat Members to the Government's efforts. Many Conservative Members want to speak and I shall not detain the House for long, but I share some of their concerns about the Bill starting life as a private Member's Bill. It should have been a Government Bill from the beginning as it clearly represents a matter of great importance.

Proliferation has been accelerated and exaggerated since the end of the cold war. Indeed, I am off to Russia tomorrow for talks with people from the Ministry of Defence about their problems. It seems clear to us that this country has a duty to impose on itself the most stringent, the most rigorous and the most transparent regime of all to ensure that we can safeguard and monitor our nuclear industry.

I believe that we have an almost unique role to play in leading the calls for multinational disarmament. This country is a leading member of the European Union, a permanent member of the Security Council and a member of the Commonwealth. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) is not in his place, but I would say to him that this country should take a lead by fulfilling our obligations because we are a key member of all those international bodies. We should do so for that reason alone.

This country has a unique position given our special relationship with the United States and our long history of developing and deploying nuclear weapons in the field. It is important that we should take the lead, and I am glad that the Government are now doing so, albeit late in the day. I definitely welcome that.

Reference has been made to the debate in the House of Lords. I commend the words of my noble Friend Lord Wallace of Saltaire. He made an excellent contribution and questioned Ministers in the other place on a number of points.

I want to ask the Minister four specific questions that I hope he will answer in his winding-up speech. Given what the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) said, will the Minister tell us why the Bill is being applied to the colonies? Does he include Gibraltar in the list? If the Bill is to be extended to the Channel islands, will he ensure that arms brokers and arms companies that place information on the internet from the colonies are also to be subject to this legislation?

What about the role of justices of the peace? It seems to us that the Bill places an important burden on them. Will they be given additional technical support and information so that they can make a proper judgment on whether to grant permission for searches to take place?

Reference has also been made to the position of the United States. Given our special relationship and the concern of hon. Members and many people in the country about the failure of the United States to ratify this and other treaties, and the suggestion that the United States will seek British participation in its national missile defence programme, will the Minister ensure that the Secretary of State for Defence raises the issue of US non-ratification with his American counterparts in any discussions he may have on the NMD programme?

What remedy does the Minister intend British citizens who are searched and have nothing on them should have? Should they have a remedy against the International Atomic Energy Agency, or against the police officers who support a search that reveals nothing?

Mr. David Heath: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this issue. The position of the IAEA is analogous to that of Europol, which has rights in this country and has immunity. The answer given by a Minister with regard to Europol was that it would be the constabulary involved against whom any civil action would be taken by an individual or company affected. As this international body also has immunity, is it my hon. Friend's understanding that the same would apply in this instance?

Mr. Keetch: Yes, it is my understanding that the remedy would be directed against the police officer who supported any search. It is important to make that point, especially as reference has already been made to nations whose Governments have attempted to prevent international monitoring.

This country has a proud record of taking a lead on attempts by all countries to control the proliferation and establish verification of nuclear weapons systems. The Bill is an important part of that, and it is unfortunate that

[Mr. Keetch]

Members from all parties in the House are not more inclined to listen to the debate. I hope that it will receive support. It will get the support of the Liberal Democrats, and I look forward to considering the Bill in Committee.

5.39 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): One of the problems with this procedure is that it always has the taste of a fait accompli. On the face of it, the House of Commons is debating a substantial matter and an important Bill concerning some important international treaties and obligations. However, the puzzlement is that the explanatory notes say:

> It was agreed by the Council of Ministers on 8 June 1998 and approved by the Board of Governors of the IAEA on 11 June. The Additional Protocol was signed in Vienna on 22 September 1998.

If it was agreed by the Council of Ministers, it is surely self-evident that a Minister representing the United Kingdom would have been present, and would have given his or her consent.

That raises the question: what is the real meaning of this parliamentary procedure? On the face of it, the answer is that we need a Bill to give effect to what the Minister said on our behalf; but is anyone seriously suggesting that if by some chance the Bill did not receive the assent of both Houses of Parliament, the Minister's signature would somehow be invalidated? What needs to be clarified—a Select Committee is considering it—is whether the Government feel that the parliamentary process that we are undertaking can have any real meaning, or whether we are expected to be some sort of rubber stamp. For instance, if we sought to amend the substance of the Bill giving effect to the protocol, would that in any way invalidate the Minister's signature, given in the Council of Ministers? That strikes me as a relevant question.

The first question, in an overall sense, is this: what is the status of our current proceedings? That is to say nothing of the Committee and Report stages, which will give the House an opportunity to examine in much more detail clauses that have already been touched on and to which I hope to return later.

Then there is the mystery of the private Member's Bill. I remember distinctly, because I was aware of its passage at the time, that the hon. Member concerned gave the impression that it was his Bill and his alone, and had nothing to do with the Government. I had my doubts at the time, and they have simply been confirmed by our proceedings.

It would appear—this is the evidence; I wait for a Minister to deny it—that the Government sought to smuggle their provisions through the parliamentary process using the vehicle of a private Member's Bill, and when that failed owing to the remarkable diligence of a certain right hon. Member, were forced to do what they should have done from the start, and give the provisions proper parliamentary time in the legislative timetable. That is what they should have done, if they thought that their proposals were sufficiently important. That, I think, explains the apparently inexplicable delay between the Government's signature in September 1998 and the Bill's being subjected to a proper parliamentary process in both Houses in 2000.

Mr. Maclean: It would be fair of my right hon. Friend to point out not just that the Government attempted to smuggle the legislation through as a private Member's Bill, but that they attempted to do so by tacking it on to the end of the Order Paper on a Friday. In those circumstances, it would have had to be bounced through with no Second Reading and no Committee stage. It would have completed all its stages instantly—a process that Madam Speaker thoroughly deplores. I am sure that you do as well, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend would agree that, even at this early stage, enough questions have been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) and the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), and in interventions, to suggest that the matter is not uncontroversial. Apparently, it is already highly controversial, and I hope to show that it involves several areas of controversy that will have to be resolved during the parliamentary process.

Mr. Bercow: It is bad enough that Ministers should browbeat a hapless Back Bencher into presenting a private Member's Bill that was not of his original choosing, but have they not compounded the error by failing at least adequately to brief the Member in question on why the Bill contained what it did contain, and did not contain what it did not contain?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that we have dealt sufficiently with the Bill's history; perhaps we could now deal with its content.

Mr. Forth: Indeed, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The protocol is at the heart of the matter. I want to spend some time on it, particularly its preamble, which mentions the awareness

> of the desire of the international community—

whatever that is, for I have never fully understood what it is; the phrase has slipped into parlance, but has no meaning, as far as I am aware—

> to further enhance—

a split infinitive appears even in the preamble of an allegedly important document—

> nuclear non-proliferation by strengthening the effectiveness and improving the efficiency of the Agency's safeguards system.

That is the rather high-blown, if ungrammatical, intention. It causes me some concern. In both domestic legislation and international treaties, there is a burgeoning of such flowery language, which may reassure some people, but does little to add any substance to what we are discussing.

I invoke briefly a speech by a gentleman called Mr. Michael Douglas, who recently appeared in the Palace of Westminster at a meeting attended by many senior and well-meaning colleagues. He glories in the title of United Nations messenger on something or other. He was here to discuss the very matter that is the substance of the protocol and the Bill. I quote a brief paragraph of his words because they are apposite:

> Right now, as we sit here in Westminster in March of the millennium year, the United States and Russia are in stalemate. The prospective adoption by the United States of a "Star Wars" missile defence system has already led Russia, China and other nations to declare that this would abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and lead to a more confrontational military posture between the US and Russia, and the US and China.

He continued:

These three treaties—the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty and the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty—underpin the current arms control regime. They are in danger of coming apart at a time when more material for making weapons of mass destruction is available worldwide than ever before.

There is still the possibility for these three treaties to be saved, and for a return to progress on multi-lateral nuclear disarmament. But it will require leadership. Britain is uniquely placed to assume this leadership role: strong influence is required in Washington, and as a result of the special relationship between our two countries, the influence of the British is particularly strong.

That is, we can assume, the view from the UN, carried to us here via the rather unlikely person of Mr. Michael Douglas, but I am sure that he was very welcome.

It gives rise to some important questions, not the least of which is: if the recent stories that the UK wishes to join the United States to extend a new anti-ballistic missile arrangement not only to North America, but to western Europe are true, that in itself will raise questions with regard to the real intentions of Her Majesty's Government on the protocol and the Bill. If Mr. Douglas is correct and if I interpret his remarks correctly, the UK Government, in wishing to go ahead and to move forward with an anti-ballistic missile arrangement, are totally at odds with the ethos, if not the terms, of the protocol and the Bill, so the Government need to come clean as to where they stand on that important issue.

Mr. Keetch: Can the right hon. Gentleman tell me what his position is and—perhaps it would be more enlightening—what the position of his Front-Bench team is on British participation in national missile defence? We have made our position clear. The Government, as he knows, have not yet made their position clear. I would be delighted and interested to know what his position is.

Mr. Forth: I would not dream of speaking on behalf of my Front-Bench team on that or any other matter, but I am pleased to give my view. I am very keen that we co-operate with our American friends on any measure that will give our citizenry protection against rogue attack from powers throughout the world. I happily take that position. It is part of the reason why I have doubts about the thrust and substance of the Bill and the protocol: can one sign up to the motherhood views and aspirations of such a protocol and Bill, yet go ahead with the real nitty-gritty—the defence imperative of an effective anti-missile defence system?

Mr. Maclean: Is not the situation worse than that? Although the Government have been saying that Britain must give a lead by signing the protocol and showing that we are willing to have International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors visit "any" of our nuclear establishments, they do not mean "any" of our nuclear establishments. In the other place, Lord McIntosh of Haringey made it clear that the protocol's additional obligations cover only civil facilities and do not extend to our defence-related facilities. If we in Great Britain are not willing to let IAEA inspectors into our military nuclear establishments, is there any hope of any other countries in the world—particularly the rogue states—agreeing to such a drastic step?

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend has, as ever, anticipated the direction of my remarks; I wanted to deal that point now. What worries me about what I would characterise as gesture legislation, or even as gesture protocol, is precisely that point.

The Minister was at pains to tell us, with some pride, that many countries—I think he said that there have been 48 approvals—have already signed and ratified the additional protocol. I have the Library's analysis of the matter. The ever excellent work of the Library shows that there have been 46 approvals, but the Minister told us that two countries have subsequently approved it. The number looks impressive, until one looks at the list's contents. If I were told that Armenia, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Ecuador and Ghana have signed the protocol, I would not be particularly impressed. I would be even less impressed if I were told that the Holy See has signed it—to say nothing of Jordan, Monaco, Peru and Portugal.

Dr. Howells *rose—*

Mr. Forth: I shall give way to the Minister in a moment.

I have named only a few countries. However, the worrying aspect of this type of exercise is that one is left wondering whether it is only a feel-good exercise for those who strut on the international stage, make self-important speeches, congratulate one another on the progress made, sign protocols and international agreements and make the sort of speeches that we have already heard today. In fact, we are given a list showing that Monaco and the Holy See have signed up to a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. As far as I know, countries such as Libya, North Korea, Iraq, and Iran have not signed it.

Are we really saying to ourselves and to the world that we are doing something productive and useful that carries us forward? I think not. I suspect that such exercises are very much a combination of factors, including the ego massage of those who attend the conferences. We have been told that one of our Ministers—the Minister for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, if I am not mistaken—will be rushing off to the conference on the protocol. *[Interruption.]* I realise that the conference will be attended not by the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, but by the Minister who represents another part of the Principality—[HON. MEMBERS: "Neath."] Indeed, Neath. I was going to spare him the embarrassment, but my hon. Friends have let the cat out of the bag. We have been told that he will go to yet another conference to strut a similar stage and make a similar speech.

It is quite sinister that the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, almost casually, in letting the cat out of the bag, told us that he expects the Bill to complete its parliamentary stages by Easter. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you can confirm that a proper regard for the procedures of the House and of parliamentary process make that extremely unlikely, to say the least.

Even supposing that the Bill were to receive a Second Reading today—about which I should have very grave reservations—that the Committee of Selection were to meet this Wednesday and rather peremptorily select the Standing Committee members, and that that Committee were to meet at the earliest possible time, which I think would be next Tuesday—does the Minister seriously suggest the Government would have the gall and arrogance to seek to ram through parliamentary procedure

[Mr. Forth]

a Bill as important and controversial as this in the two parliamentary days remaining between completion of the Committee's consideration—were it to sit only once, which I think unlikely, given the reservations already expressed—and the House rising for Easter?

I hope that the Minister made an error or slip of the tongue, and misunderstood what he was saying so he could not possibly be suggesting that the Government would have the gall, even before the Bill has received a Second Reading, to consider telescoping parliamentary process to that extent. I hope that he will confirm that.

Mr. Bercow: Is my right hon. Friend suggesting—for the avoidance of any doubt—that the Minister's preference was to ensure that consideration of the Bill in Committee, on Report and on Third Reading is completed on Tuesday 18 April? What a monstrous suggestion.

Mr. Forth: I do not want to put words into the Minister's mouth. I am saying—

Dr. Howells: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Forth: We shall have an explanation. Of course I shall give way.

Dr. Howells: I asked the right hon. Gentleman whether he would give way about five minutes ago. He told me that he would, but he has taken a bit of time in doing so. I am afraid that the verb that is being used is wrong. The fact is that I had hoped—not preferred—that we would be able to make progress on the legislation. Clearly, that hope was a forlorn one.

Mr. Forth: I acknowledge immediately that the Minister's courtesy is an exception to Ministers' usual arrogance to the House. He does us the courtesy of giving way frequently in speeches and of doing his best to answer questions. Typically, he has now shown the proper respect for parliamentary process that is shared by all too few of his colleagues. I am grateful for his comments, which make me feel easier about how the Bill may proceed, were it to be given a Second Reading later today.

Mr. Wilshire: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: I am making only my preliminary remarks, but I should like to deal with the protocol and then the Bill. I hope that my hon. Friend will not detain me too long.

Mr. Wilshire: No; I am sure that Mr. Deputy Speaker would not allow that. My right hon. Friend comments on the Minister's kindness and generosity, but would he not be even more impressed if the Minister not only showed us the courtesies that he has listed, but accepted our arguments?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is pushing his luck a little too far. Let us take it one stage at a time and see whether, on Second Reading, we can tease out some of the problems in the Bill, receive from the Government an acknowledgement of them, and then perhaps get a sense of the possible shape of the Committee's deliberations. I have not even mentioned consideration on Report, when there will have to be further deliberation. That is probably as much as we can expect in this debate.

I think that, in a parliamentary sense, it is proper that the debate on Second Reading should enable us to map out the Bill's broad shape and the type of anxieties that hon. Members express. Such a process will provide some clues, and it might even help the Government in timetabling the legislation. It might also help the Government not to send off the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office with too high an expectation—so that he is not too disappointed when he goes to mix with his very important colleagues, on a very important international stage, to make very important speeches to one another—of being able to go with this Bill tucked in his back pocket.

Mr. Robathan: My right hon. Friend is making an important point. Does it not underline his earlier comments—exempting from criticisms the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, who used to pull with me on the tug-of-war team, although he now has a rather weak back—on the Government's attempt in the previous Session to push through very quickly, with the minimum of attention, the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that that point has already been more than well made.

Mr. Forth: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I am grateful for its endorsement by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan).

I shall not allow my hon. Friends to prevent me from dealing now with the thrust of my argument. I really should like to deal with the protocol, which is what the Bill is all about. The more that I read the protocol, however, the more it worries me. Therefore, it will take me a little time to go through some of my worries.

I start with article 2, under the general heading of "Provision of Information". It states:

> The United Kingdom shall provide the Agency with a declaration containing the information identified in sub-paragraphs (i) . . . below.

Sub-paragraph (i) goes on to talk about

> A general description of and information specifying the location of those nuclear fuel cycle-related research and development activities carried out anywhere that are funded, specifically authorised or controlled by, or carried out on behalf of, the United Kingdom.

Even in the early stages of the protocol, we begin to see the extent of the legislative commitments that we may have to make to fulfil its requirements. My suspicion is that lurking behind those bland words is the possibility that a lot of our institutions could become subject to some difficult arrangements. For example,

> nuclear fuel cycle-related research and development activities

could refer to our universities. We should ask whether we are comfortable with our great seats of learning, with their proud tradition of academic freedom and freedom from Government intervention, being the subject of potential intervention not just, as we shall see later when we look at the Bill in detail, from domestic agencies, protected by warrants and by justices of the peace, but from the rather odd international agency, manned inevitably by foreign

nationals. The Minister seemed a bit afraid of that word earlier, but we shall hear a lot of it as the debate unfolds. Our universities in particular may well be subject to intrusion by an agency that is unaccountable in any sense to any organ of government or representation in this country. So article 2.a(i) already thoroughly arouses my suspicions.

We asked the Minister earlier whether any institutions, bodies, companies or businesses had expressed any unhappiness about the provisions. I am surprised that our universities have not expressed some disquiet about the fact that their jealously guarded academic freedom and independence and their research and development work may well be subject to intrusion and invasion by an unaccountable and unelected body that is not even subject to proper judicial process through a warrant given by justices of the peace.

Mr. Bercow: Is not the explanation for that blindingly obvious? Most of the seats of learning in this country are supremely unaware of the existence of the Bill, let alone of its potential application to them.

Mr. Forth: That is one explanation. Another might be that the universities are full of lefties and CND supporters. There could be any number of possible reasons. Perhaps it would be incautious of me to go into them in too much detail at this stage. I am merely flagging up the anxieties that it would be right for us to acknowledge about the protocol to which the Bill gives effect.

Mr. Fabricant: I wanted to intervene on my right hon. Friend before he left the subject of our academic institutions. Does he recall that the Minister admitted that there may be same-sex examination? What would he think if his daughter was being investigated or examined by a male examiner from abroad, probing—I do not know why the Minister laughs—every orifice?

Mr. Forth: I shall come to the sexual aspects of the Bill in due course, although not quite in the terms that my hon. Friend has asked. I certainly want to keep my daughter—or daughters, as it is—out of this altogether. I have highlighted some of the issues in my research and I shall deal with some of the implications of the provisions of clause 4(7), to which my hon. Friend referred, because they raise some important practical questions, not least on the difference of approach between clauses 4 and 5. We have not got anywhere near the Bill yet—I am still on the early stages of the protocol. I hope that he will forgive me if I try to keep my remarks in reasonable order, so that hon. Members can appreciate the development of my logic.

Having skirted briefly over article 2 of the protocol, I turn to article 4, which has the bland heading "Complementary Access". It also gives early hints of the extent of the powers that the protocol might lead us to have to give in the Bill. It again refers to the mysterious, shadowy international agency, whose composition we shall have to return to shortly, because it raises a lot of questions. The article says:

> The Agency shall not mechanistically or systematically seek to verify the information referred to in article 2—

which I have touched on briefly—

> however, the Agency shall have access to—

the article then gives a list, including

> Any location referred to in Article 5.c.

Here again, the scope of the protocol is broadened, which inevitably drives the provisions of the Bill—because the two are inextricably linked—to any location. That is far too all-encompassing and comprehensive to give our citizenry any relief.

I move rapidly on to article 5, which says that the United Kingdom shall provide the Agency with access to:

> Any location specified by the Agency, other than locations referred to in paragraphs a. and b. above, to carry out location-specific environmental sampling

and so on. It then says

> the United Kingdom shall make every reasonable effort to satisfy Agency requirements, without delay, at adjacent locations or through other means.

We have become distressingly used to such wording in domestic legislation. The protocol contains comprehensive and all-embracing provisions, talking about "any location", satisfying agency requirements "without delay", which is gratuitous and a bit insulting, and

> adjacent locations or through other means.

It is one thing to make provision for access to specific locations. The earlier parts of the protocol lull us into a false sense of security that it is reassuringly specific, but it is nothing of the kind. I would not accuse any hon. Member, least of all those present, of having made only a superficial examination of anything, but even my superficial examination of article 5 has flushed out the fact that we are talking about adjacent locations. That makes it possible to extend the scope of the activities of the shadowy and rather sinister agency not just to the locations specified, but to adjacent locations—that gives very wide scope—"or through other means". That is our old friend the blanket provision, which would allow the agency to go almost anywhere and to do almost anything. That is the protocol to which we are being asked to give effect.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend has rightly pointed out that the protocol covers academic institutions. Has he had a chance to estimate the disincentive for institutions such as Microsoft to invest in science parks adjacent to institutions such as Cambridge university, which has nuclear research facilities?

Mr. Forth: I do not want to explore that in too much detail at this stage, because my hon. Friend is inviting me to speculate on whether there is a difference in approach between, on the one hand, universities, other academic institutions and research and development facilities and commercial businesses such as Microsoft, which will carry out research and development that may have a bearing on nuclear facilities and could well be adjacent in location, and, on the other hand, more specifically nuclear facilities, which can be identified more readily. I shall not explore that at this stage. I suspect that some of my hon. Friends may want to pick up on that point later. I do not want to detain the House for too long.

Mr. Bercow: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: Well, yes, but I am trying to make progress.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend is making splendid progress. However, is not the use of this rather worrying and vague term "by other means" indicative of a tendency, certainly in the context of the protocol and the Bill, to abandon the traditional British legislator's insistence upon specificity in favour of high-falutin' continental declarations of good intent? If this is to be an all-embracing power, is it not doubly important that aggrieved parties should have proper recourse to the law if they feel that the powers contained in the Bill and the protocol have been improperly applied?

Mr. Forth: I would have thought that that is self-evident, and obviously my hon. Friend does. However, that does not seem to have occurred to the Government. It is something that we want to explore when we come to examine the Bill in detail, as I hope that we shall do fairly shortly. We want to explore the differences between the relevant clauses. I am trying to get through the protocol as quickly as possible while doing it justice, and I want to move on.

I may surprise the House, including yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I want to identify what I think is a weakness in the provisions of the protocol that might undermine the effectiveness of its aims. I hope that this approach will show my even-handedness. I have been rather sceptical and negative about the protocol, and that reflects my general demeanour. I wish to examine some rather worrying provisions.

If the protocol and the inspection process are to be effective, it is essential that there should be the element of surprise. That being so, I was surprised when I read the detail of article 4b(i) and (ii) and then c and e. Article 4b(i) states that the agency

shall give the United Kingdom . . . advance notice of access of at least 24 hours.

Sub-paragraph (ii) adds that there can be a period of

at least two hours but, in exceptional circumstances, it may be less than two hours.

Paragraph c provides:

Advance notice shall be in writing and shall specify the reasons for access and the activities to be carried out during such access.

Astonishingly, paragraph e states:

Unless otherwise agreed to by the United Kingdom, access shall only take place during regular working hours.

If we are to have effective inspection within a highly sensitive area, it is astonishing that the inspectors should be trammelled and hemmed in by these provisions of notice. Whether we are talking about domestic school inspections or health and safety inspections, surely their effectiveness must be diminished by the extent to which advance notice must be given. If we are saying that the inspector has to say in writing, "Excuse me chaps, but we are coming to see you in a few days' time and we hope to root out all your nuclear secrets and find out how it is that you are making bombs without telling anyone," that is surely an ineffective approach.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Does my right hon: Friend's memory take him back to previous arms control treaties? There was once something called the seabed treaty, which provided that it was all right to have nuclear submarines patrolling the depths but not to install nuclear weapons on the seabed. Was not that truly likened to an agreement not to screw aircraft to the ground? In that sense, is not the Bill part of a long and honourable tradition?

Mr. Forth: That may be. I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that my hon. Friend will seek to catch your eye later. His knowledge of these matters is infinitely greater than mine will ever be, and I defer to him. He has illustrated what often underlies these measures: they are high on intent and aspiration and regrettably low on substance and effectiveness. My example seems to suggest that that is the position. Either we are serious about these matters or we are not.

Given all the high-flown words of Ministers, their attendance at conferences, their signing of documents and the issuing of protocols, where is the beef? The astonishing requirements of advance notice do not add anything to the effectiveness of the proposed measures. Almost certainly they detract from it.

I move on rapidly to article 4f, which states:

The United Kingdom, or for access under article 5.a. or otherwise involving nuclear material, the United Kingdom and the Community, shall have the right to have Agency inspectors accompanied during their access by representatives of the United Kingdom.

There is some reassurance for those of us who are worried about foreign nationals tramping round the United Kingdom and invading private premises and people's inherent and well-founded rights. There is some comfort that the inspectors will be accompanied by representatives of the United Kingdom, and as appropriate by Community inspectors,

provided that Agency inspectors shall not thereby be delayed or otherwise impeded in the exercise of their functions.

Having given us an apparent assurance, that is almost immediately undermined by the document stating, as I read it and unless the Minister tells me otherwise, that it will be at the discretion of agency inspectors to determine whether they feel that they have been delayed or impeded. If they can argue that they will be delayed or impeded if they have to wait to be accompanied by representatives of the United Kingdom, they can exercise the enormous powers that are provided by the Bill without any such accompaniment. There is an attempt to give an assurance that Members might reasonably expect, but almost immediately that is taken away. That is characteristic of the protocol throughout in that it seeks to face both ways.

Article 7 deals with the important matter of sensitive information. It provides:

Upon request by the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom and the Agency shall make arrangements for managed access under this Protocol to prevent the dissemination—

I think that there is a misprint—

of proliferation sensitive information . . . to protect proprietary or commercially sensitive information.

It will help us in Committee and on Report if the Minister will explain how the Government envisage these important arrangements being made and being made effective. That will require an institutional arrangement and protocols within the protocol or within the terms of the Bill to try to ensure that concern about sensitive information is properly met. How will that be done?

The article adds that the arrangements about protecting sensitivity

> shall not preclude the Agency from conducting activities necessary to resolve a question relating to the correctness and completeness of the information.

It appears that the agency always has a let out. Having been given an assurance about sensitivity or whatever, we are told almost immediately that if the agency sees things differently, it will always have the last word. Our citizenry and those running our academic and business institutions can well be uneasy about that.

I move on to article 11. The House will see that I am picking up pace as I go along.

Dr. Lewis: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: I will, but I am getting quite close to the end of my examination of the protocol. I am anxious to have a brief discussion about human rights, and then I will start considering the Bill.

Dr. Lewis: I eagerly anticipate the later stages of my right hon. Friend's disquisition.

While accepting my right hon. Friend's concerns about the academic freedoms of our universities being impinged upon, does he recognise that there might be a problem in dealing with non-democracies which sign the protocol? Is there not a danger that they would set up bogus educational institutions as covers to manufacture weapons of mass destruction that would be secure from inspection? Is that why the Government feel that they must go as far as they are, despite my right hon. Friend's concerns?

Mr. Forth: I will not attempt to cover that point. I know that many of my colleagues, especially my hon. Friend, are much more qualified to deal with it than I am, and I hope that they will expand upon it. Suffice to say that I share that anxiety.

There is an inherent paradox in the whole process, because the member states which take a pride in their democratic accountability and their international responsibilities will sign up to such treaties. They regularly rub shoulders, and congratulate each other on what responsible world citizens they are. The regrettable paradox is that the very states that ignore the international treaties and do not sign up to them are the ones that are most likely to be a global threat. I shall not explore that matter further now, because I prefer to stick to the minutiae and leave the global vision to those of my colleagues who are much better qualified to address it.

Articles 11 and 12 are interlinked. Article 11 states:

> Unless the Community or the United Kingdom advises the Director General of the rejection of such an official as an inspector for the United Kingdom within three months of . . . the Board's approval, the inspector so notified . . . shall be considered designated.

That is a long-winded way of saying—at least, I hope so—that the United Kingdom would have a veto on inspectors. That is an important point and I want the Minister to answer it specifically when he winds up. Is my reading of article 11 correct and will the UK have a veto over the appointment of inspectors? If the answer is yes, I will be somewhat reassured. If it is no, for any reason, I will be very worried that any old foreign national could come in to this country and exercise the extraordinary powers in the Bill.

Dr. Howells: I am delighted to tell the right hon. Gentleman that the answer is yes, we have a veto.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the Minister for that courteous and prompt reply to my question. Article 12 contains an important point about visas. Some of my right hon. and hon. Friends present have far greater knowledge on that subject than I do and I shall, therefore, tread only delicately on that ground in the hope that the issue will be covered later in the debate. Suffice it to say that, on the face of it—this is another question for the Minister—it looks as if the normal sovereign power of this country to grant or withhold visas to foreign nationals who wish to come to the United Kingdom will be completely nullified and overridden by this extraordinary provision in article 12.

Article 12 states—I can scarce believe it—

> The United Kingdom shall . . . provide the designated inspector specified—

one who has survived our veto—

> with appropriate multiple entry/exit and/or transit visas, where required, to enable the inspector to enter and remain on the territory of the United Kingdom.

It continues:

> Any visas . . . shall be valid for at least one year and shall be renewed, as required.

That may be completely at odds with many of our domestic statutory provisions and with the powers that I thought that this country had retained for itself as sovereign, even within the European Union. Were we to give effect to article 12, we might give up our power to control the entry of foreign nationals to this country. If that is the case, that is extraordinarily worrying.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Has my right hon. Friend considered the implications of such visas being made available for a period of as long as a year at a time? Even if nothing untoward were done in the course of the inspection visits themselves, undesirable people such as senior intelligence officers would have the facility to come and go at other times apart from when they were doing their job and inspecting the nuclear facilities.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend's point reinforces the point that I have just made. The article does not require that the visits by inspectors should be specific to their duties or responsibilities. Instead, it gives those foreign nationals complete freedom to move in and out of the United Kingdom for any unrelated purpose.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the uncertain extent to which this country retains a veto over international persons coming here to undertake their responsibilities, we should not derive undue comfort from the veto? What matters, as Hayek long ago taught us, is not who the men are but what the measures are. Is it not essential that we should keep clearly in view the fact of those substantial powers and the need for adequate safeguards against their abuse, whoever the individuals exercising them?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is right, as ever, and safeguards are there none. My amendment mentions the

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Human Rights Act 1998, and I am not remotely satisfied by the Minister's statement—one could hardly call it an explanation—that the Government are satisfied that the provisions in the Bill are in accord with the Act and, therefore, the European convention on human rights. The first article of the convention covers the protection of property and states:

> Every natural or legal person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions. No one shall be deprived of his possessions except in the public interest and subject to the conditions provided for by law and by the general principles of international law.

It continues:

> The preceding provisions shall not, however, in any way impair the right of a State to enforce such laws as it deems necessary to control the use of property in accordance with the general interest.

That is fair enough, and I would argue even before the Minister—although I do not see any signs of him wishing to intervene—that clause 4 probably accords with the spirit of the convention and the Human Rights Act 1998. It gives the reassurance that powers of entry will be given to an authorised officer or constable, that a warrant must be issued by a justice of the peace and that the Secretary of State must be involved.

The worry arises from clause 5, which would allow foreign nationals absolute rights of access to people's property in the United Kingdom. That must be against the spirit and the letter of the convention and the Act because there is no mechanism of accountability within a democratic framework, such as that in which the convention was cast in the late 1940s and has been carried forward ever since. The difference in substance between the approaches in clause 4 and in clause 5 mean that it is perilously close to a breach of the Human Rights Act 1998—as I contend in my amendment. I hope that we will hear more on that point.

Mr. Maclean: I thought that one of the precepts of the Human Rights Act 1998 was that no individual should be deprived of his property or have his rights interfered with without due process of law. The whole point about clause 5 is that it will allow inspectors access to individuals' property without any due process of law.

Mr. Forth: Indeed, and that may be a matter to which we shall return in Committee and on Report. It is our duty as representatives of our citizenry to try to ensure that we give them the maximum reassurance that we can in terms of the Bill.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Forth: I shall give way to my hon. Friend but I do not wish to be delayed too much. I am now coming to the Bill itself, and that will be very exciting.

Mr. Bercow: I am waiting for that with bated breath and beads of sweat upon my brow. However, has my right hon. Friend noticed clause 5(6) which refers to a possible dispute and proceedings that might take place about whether someone purporting to be an agency inspector is actually an inspector? Apart from that opaque reference, no reference is made to possible proceedings and the legal entitlements of aggrieved parties to pursue proceedings against agency inspectors.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful, but my hon. Friend is slightly anticipating me on the matter of the mysterious certificate. I shall talk about that later, although it is unclear what reassurance it gives. However, I want to go through the Bill reasonably in order.

I have little to say about clause 1, but clause 2 presents a potential problem. It states:

> No obligation as to secrecy or other restriction on disclosure . . . prevents a person voluntarily giving information to the Secretary of State if that person has reason to believe that it is Additional Protocol information.

However, the ellipsis in *Hansard* will show where I omitted the following words

> whether imposed by statute or otherwise.

They appear in brackets in the Bill and seem to cause potential conflict between this Bill and other statutes referring to the law of contract.

At least one of my colleagues is a lawyer who may be able to say more about the matter, but I want guidance from the Minister. Is there any substance to my suspicion that a statute that protects contractual confidentiality or secrecy—between institutions or between a person and an institution—might collide with what seem to the overriding provisions of the clause? Could that problem be resolved?

I am not clear about what happens when there is a conflict between the absolute requirements of different statutes.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The courts will resolve it.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is an eminent lawyer, but his remark is uncharacteristically unhelpful. I am not sure that it is good enough for the courts to resolve the matter. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), is going to an important international convention where he will rub shoulders with people who will ask how Britain is getting on with implementing the protocol. Is it satisfactory that he will tell them that everything is fine with the Bill, apart from matters to be resolved by the courts? The hon. Gentleman will not know how the matters will be resolved, and is unlikely be happy with that. However, perhaps the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs will help us out.

Dr. Howells: The House may be interested to know that I married a Neath girl, but she is not the present hon. Member for Neath.

Article 15 of the additional protocol requires the agency to maintain a stringent regime to ensure that there is effective protection of information. However, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) is right: ultimately, the matter will be resolved by the courts.

Mr. Forth: The Government have some serious questions to answer about their international obligations. I am not sure that it is good enough that Ministers attending international meetings to give an account of the Government's commitment to this protocol and to all the treaties that precede it will have to admit that the British courts will resolve any conflict that arises. What if the courts resolve the matter in favour of the statute requiring secrecy and confidentiality rather than disclosure?

Mr. Maclean: By the time that the courts determined that statutory law of contract took precedence, a person

could have been sentenced to two years' imprisonment—the clause 9 penalty for failing to provide information under the Bill. However, might not that person find later that the courts resolve the matter in his favour under statute law?

Mr. Forth: That strikes me as all too possible. It is another potential intrusion on a person's human rights. Conflicts as to which Act overrides another will be institutionalised in our law.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I was surprised when my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) said that the courts would decide the matter. Does that mean that our domestic courts could decide whether an international treaty should take precedence when a matter of secrecy is the alleged excuse for non-compliance? What about the courts in other signatory countries that are not independent of their Governments? I hope that my right hon. Friend will press the Minister on that.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is right. His remarks raise a series of questions about the different approaches in different countries. Some countries have democratic accountability and independent judiciaries, but many other signatories to the protocol may not.

Clause 3.1 states:

> The Secretary of State may make regulations requiring persons of any description specified in the regulations to inform him that they are of such a description and to give such supplementary particulars as may be so specified.

What sort of regulations does the Secretary of State have in mind? That is a broad provision. We need some idea of the regulations before we can consent to the Bill.

The reassurances given in the early subsections of clause 4 include the involvement of a justice of the peace and of the Secretary of State, who is an elected person accountable through collective responsibility. The clause also requires that a warrant has to be issued that gives powers only to authorised officers. All that is very reassuring, but clause 4(5) deals with the powers of those authorised officers, and again I feel the need to tread delicately. There are at least three hon. Members present whose expertise in matters electronic is legendary, so I shall be careful about what I say.

My next question is directed to those of my hon. Friends who know about these matters. Clause 4(5) deals with

> the powers of an authorised officer who enters premises under the authority of a warrant under this section

and, as set out in clause 4(5)(c), that power is

> to require any information which is held in electronic form and is accessible from the premises to be reproduced in a form in which he can read and copy it

What if no person able to access information held electronically is available to perform that task? My knowledge of electronics is scant to minuscule, but do not most systems have a security code or a provision that mean that only a certain number of people can gain access? What if the person who knows the code is not available?

Dr. Lewis: Perhaps I can enlighten my right hon. Friend. I think that he has just put his finger on a reason for one of the apparent anomalies that he identified earlier—the need to give notification in advance that an inspection is to be made. It would then be held to be unreasonable if the granting of access were not forthcoming.

I thought that my right hon. Friend was going to say that the provision gives no indication as to how the inspector will know whether any such electronically held information exists. Surely the inspector will simply be relying on the candour and good will of the person who has squirrelled away the information in cyberspace.

Mr. Forth: I knew that someone would come to my rescue, and it demonstrates why I should not dwell on it. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. How does an authorised officer, an inspector or anyone else know what is contained within a system that is extraordinarily complex and may contain different levels of security? How will they know what to look for, or how to exercise the powers provided in clause 4(5)(c)?

I have a simple question on clause 4(6), which the Minister may be able to answer now or, if not, subsequently. Does the term

> A constable who enters premises

also cover other ranks of the police? If not, the provision may be unduly restrictive.

Mr. Maclean: I think I am right in saying that "constable" covers every rank of the police, from constable up to chief constable. They all serve in the office of constable. I have indications from elsewhere in the Chamber that that is right.

Mr. Forth: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. That allows me to put that matter immediately to rest, which brings me—

Mr. Fabricant: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: I was just coming on to sex. My hon. Friend is keen on that, so I hope that he will not keep me from it.

Mr. Fabricant: I would not like to deter my right hon. Friend from sex—indeed, I am also keen to get on to that subject. However, I am interested in the definition of "constable". We have already heard that inspectors can be other nationals. This may sound like a flippant point, but it is not meant to be. In law, does a constable always mean a British constable, or could it mean a gendarme, a Schultzmann or an officer from any other country? Does it have to be a British police officer?

Mr. Forth: Or a military policeman, perhaps. I will leave others to answer that. I suspect that it will be the sort of police officer with which we are familiar. However, the authorised officer could be any of the agencies or individuals that my hon. Friend mentions, because that is at the discretion of the Secretary of State. We will come in a moment to clause 5, where the real horrors begin. Clause 4 is the reassuring clause, about which we are supposed to feel comfortable.

I want to touch on the intriguing and, to some of us, odd provision that no constable shall search a person of the opposite sex. That may seem self-evident; it may go beyond political correctness. I am sure that it is about

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gender and other modern things that we are supposed to be keen on. However, it raises practical difficulties. Will the gender of the people on the premises who will be held to account under the provisions of the protocol always be known before a warrant is exercised? Or will the officers, constables or authorised officers always have to go in multi-sex mode?

These are real and practical requirements. As with giving notice, I am worried that this could, in some circumstances, inhibit the proper execution of the responsibilities under clause 4(7). A woman police constable—if we are still allowed to say that—may not be available. It may not always be possible to have people of all genders available. I do not know how many genders there are supposed to be these days.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Or of all sexual orientations.

Mr. Forth: Perish the thought. However, real, practical difficulties could flow from this apparently politically correct provision.

Mr. Maclean: The problem could perhaps be partially solved if we changed some of the rather sloppy drafting of clause 4(6) which refers simply to a search. I recall that under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 or other Home Office legislation, search was subdivided into intimate body searches and those which merely involve the removal of a jacket or outer garment. Perhaps if the word were more precisely defined, the sex of the person conducting a superficial, non-intimate search might not be so important.

Mr. Forth: I have been in the House long enough to know not to be led too far down such a track. I am sure that my right hon. Friend was intending to be helpful, but I will leave it to him, with his vast knowledge and experience of these matters, to explore the possibilities of intimate searches or the concealment of nuclear bits and pieces on or in the body. It is not a matter for me.

I am coming perilously close to the conclusion of my remarks. I say that so that whoever follows me can get in the mood. It may seem odd that I shall not be dwelling excessively on clause 5, to which I now turn my attention. Clause 5, which is the most contentious part of the Bill and causes us the most concern, has already been referred to quite extensively during our exchanges and interventions, so I do not need to gild that particular lily.

It is self-evident that clause 5 will cause the most concern. I argued earlier that its provisions may well cause a breach of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights. That notwithstanding, it gives the agency unlimited powers to allow foreign nationals to come into this country on an automatic visa. The Government, who represent us and are supposed to protect us, are signing away their power to prevent a foreign national from coming in under the aegis of the agency, which has enormous powers under clause 5.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Does my right hon. Friend see a possibility of conflict if one of the inspectors, allowed in on a year-long visa, is found to be doing something improper when he is not inspecting, and the Government wish to expel him, as we normally do when unacceptable espionage is carried out? Difficulties could arise if it were claimed that, according to the protocol, his visa could not be withdrawn.

Mr. Forth: Yes, that gives rise to a series of consequential questions on how far the agency inspectors may be covered by diplomatic immunity. Are they simply foreign nationals to whom a visa has been given for the purposes of the protocol and the Bill, or do they have an overriding and superior diplomatic immunity of a kind to which my hon. Friend alludes? I do not know the answer to those questions. The Minister may be able to tell us. This is the sort of matter to which we shall want to return in Committee and on Report.

These examples serve to illustrate why the Bill needs this thorough examination. I have been only superficial so far, of course. The really thorough examination must come, perforce, in Committee and on Report. That is another reason why the Minister will have to tell the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office that he may have to disappoint his colleagues at this important international meeting by saying that, regrettably, the matter is still under close parliamentary scrutiny.

Mr. Maclean: I appreciate that my right hon. Friend has passed on from the immunity question. However, I am sure that he will recall in the statute of the International Atomic Energy Agency, when it was set up, that article 15 on privileges and immunity states:

> The agency shall enjoy in the territory of each member such legal capacity and such privileges and immunities as are necessary for the exercise of its functions.

There are also other provisions about capacity, privileges and immunities.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend has confirmed our worst fears. We are adding privilege upon privilege, access upon access and right upon right. This appears to be outside the control of the Government who, for the time being, represent the people of this country.

Clause 5(4) and (5)—which deal with an authorised officer or constable accompanying an agency inspector—may seem reassuring, but the word "may" is included. I would have preferred "shall". We need the maximum reassurance, and to weaken the provision in this way could give rise to greater concern.

Mr. Bercow: Is not the concern otherwise that the use of the word "may" in clause 5(5) could conflict with the requirements of clause 5(7), and we would not want an internal contradiction within one clause of this significant Bill?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend's forensic and analytical skills are unsurpassed. I have identified sufficient contradictions within the protocol to cause concern, and we are now teasing out contradictions within the Bill. Thank goodness for proper parliamentary scrutiny. If, by some ghastly mistake, the Bill—in its previous incarnation as a private Member's Bill—had been passed, as it had been disgracefully suggested, without proper scrutiny, goodness knows what would have happened.

On the face of it, clause 5(6) should provide reassurance, but fails to do so completely. It says:

in any proceedings any question arises whether a person at any time when purporting to exercise powers under this section was or was not an Agency inspector, a certificate issued by or under the authority of the Secretary of State stating any fact relevant to that question shall be conclusive evidence of that fact.

We do not know when that certificate will be available. Will it become available automatically, before the agency inspector begins his task? Will it be made available by the Secretary of State during the inspection if a query arises? Will it be available subsequently? If it is available only subsequently, it will be no use whatever, as there is no point in looking for the Secretary of State's approval afterwards.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Is not the answer contained in the clause, where it says

If in any proceedings any question arises?

Surely that presupposes that the certificate will be called for only if there has been a challenge to the credentials of an inspector, which would delay and undermine the efficacy of the inspection.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend may be correct, and the Minister will have to look at this again. All Bills are carefully drafted, and each word has meaning and significance. However, the implication is that, if a matter arises during the inspection, a certificate may be required, suggesting that the Secretary of State would have to provide a certificate during an inspection. Those of us with even a glancing knowledge of Government know that that is unlikely. The danger is that this invalidate the inspection process.

We are back to the paradox of the Bill. The protocol and the Bill give the most enormous powers not only to domestic institutions—which at least have a degree of accountability and are subject to the force of the law—but to these strange and foreign institutions, manned by foreign nationals, who will come to this country and will be unaccountable to either the democratic or judicial process. On the other hand, we have apparent weakness, deficiencies and lacunae in the protocol and Bill which may undermine the effectiveness of the proposal.

The Bill is a mess, and the more I look at it, the more doubts I have. I hope that, even if the House decides to give the Bill a Second Reading tonight, it will want to examine it closely in Committee and subsequently.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Before I call the next hon. Member to speak, I shall try to offer some guidance to the House in accordance with "Erskine May". Second Reading debates are intended to deal with general principles. I have given the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—and other right hon. and hon. Members who have intervened—considerable leeway. However, those interventions which go into detail are matters for the Committee stage, when the House is entitled to the closest scrutiny of any proposed legislation before it. We will now proceed on the basis that we are dealing with the general principles of the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would you expect, notwithstanding the helpful guidance that you have just proffered to the House, that, where a point of detail is of concern to a Member to such a degree that it will affect his or her judgment as to the merits of the principle of the Bill, it is legitimate to raise such an inquiry, either via a speech or through an intervention?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is always a matter of proportionality. It is perfectly in order to flag up a point that might require detailed examination at the appropriate stage of the Bill. It is not in order to have that detailed scrutiny of a small point or a sub-clause at Second Reading. "Erskine May" is quite clear; we should deal with general principles.

6.58 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I am grateful for your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and it would have been enormously helpful to me had you given it earlier. During the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), I was fretting that my speech was far too general, and I was beginning to worry that you would rule me out of order. I have therefore spent a little while trying to get the details that you now say I do not need.

I am a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, to which the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) kindly referred. As he said, the Committee is carrying out an inquiry into weapons of mass destruction, which is highly relevant to the matter before us. I am at a disadvantage, because whereas the hon. Gentleman will have been given by the authors a number of documents—to which he has, quite properly, referred—much of the paperwork that I have received is covered by the rules of the House. That means that I cannot refer to them without being in danger of disclosing confidential information that has not yet been published by the Select Committee.

Mr. Colman: The matters that I read out earlier were from the written evidence given at a Select Committee meeting. I was not quoting evidence given to the Select Committee orally, which has not yet been disclosed.

Mr. Wilshire: I was not suggesting that the hon. Gentleman was disclosing confidential information. I was saying that I would find it difficult to follow his helpful points and references to publicly available information. The difficulty is mine, not his. I am not sure what is confidential and what is not. I have heard everything, whereas the hon. Gentleman has heard only that part that is public.

I am sorry that the Minister did not explain why the Bill should have been given priority by the Government over other parliamentary business. I regularly read in the newspapers, and hear it said around the Palace, that the Government are pressed for parliamentary time, but we have been offered no explanation of why the Bill has been given priority. It has been hanging around for a couple of years without appearing urgent, so why has it become urgent now?

Dr. Julian Lewis: I apologise for having missed the early stages of this debate, but I am disturbed to hear that the Bill has been attempted systematically over two years or so. We have been told that the UK would be one of

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

relatively few signatories to the additional protocol, which suggests that the Government were once anxious that we should sign it before virtually anyone else.

Mr. Wilshire: I shall come to that point in some detail, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right. He should keep it in mind that only eight countries have signed up to the protocol, and he will see why I think that figure relevant when I come to discuss the countries involved.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): There is a stronger case than the one my hon. Friend is making. During the past two years, the strategy behind the non-proliferation and test ban treaties has become flawed. India and Pakistan have tested nuclear weapons. It is easy to disappear into the minutiae of individual clauses in Second Reading debates, but we should be rethinking the entire purpose of the Bill to see whether we can do something to stop proliferators by mechanisms other than this failed one.

Mr. Wilshire: Exactly so. I shall return to that point when I have concluded my response to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who suggested that there had been regular attempts during the past two years to pass the Bill through the House. What he did not hear earlier was a discussion of how few attempts had, in fact, been made. The Bill was tried as a private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Putney, which is why that hon. Gentleman made such a helpful speech explaining his position. In two years, the Government's best effort lay in having a private Member divert himself from whatever he felt passionate about to pilot through a Bill that they wanted to shuffle through late on a Friday afternoon. Nothing much else has been done.

Only eight countries have signed the protocol, suggesting that it is not all that important. The Minister has made no effort to tell us what has suddenly changed.

Mr. Savidge: I want to correct an impression possibly given by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) in his intervention. Neither India nor Pakistan is a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, a fact from which we should surely draw the lesson that it would be better to strengthen and widen the treaty.

Mr. Wilshire: The hon. Gentleman reinforces what my right hon. Friend said. However, we must tackle a point on which the Minister conspicuously failed to touch—why this matter should be given priority over others.

Mr. David Davis: May I remind the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) that I negotiated the test ban treaty on behalf of the United Kingdom? Both that treaty and the non-proliferation treaty have a proliferation aim built into them. The hon. Gentleman was quite right to say that India and Pakistan have not signed, but those countries provide a clear weather vane as to the direction in which the world is going and the ineffectiveness of the treaty.

Mr. Wilshire: I am most grateful for that intervention. It adds some facts to the debate on a matter on which my right hon. Friend is an expert. It also puts me on notice to watch my step, as I am standing just behind a walking expert—

Mr. Davis: A sitting expert.

Mr. Wilshire: I take the point.

Mr. Bercow: I may be able to resolve the uncertainty in my hon. Friend's mind about why Ministers attach such importance to a speedy passage of the Bill. Would that not assist the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), when he makes his scheduled visit to an important international conference, at which he will mix with extremely important, highly respected, influential figures from the international community? Obviously, the hon. Gentleman will wish to display his wares in the form of a successfully passed Bill.

Mr. Wilshire: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but while I am many things, some of which I hope he approves of, I am not a clairvoyant. My ability to answer questions about what may be in the mind of the Minister is therefore minimal, if not non-existent. I must leave it to the Minister to tell us what he has in mind.

Mr. Leigh: This conversazione between my hon. Friend and others worries me enormously. A few centuries ago, Parliament was prepared to declare civil war because a Government sought, through the Ship Money Act 1640, to allow inspectors to enter private property. The Government sought to edge this Bill in through the private Member's Bill procedure, then sat on it for two years before introducing it on a quiet Monday afternoon. What is going on? Where are our parliamentary colleagues who should stand up for the freedom of the individual to prevent the Executive—and foreigners—from invading their homes?

Mr. Wilshire: My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made a splendid attempt to do exactly that, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who is a champion of the rights of the individual, will do the same while I cheer him on.

Mr. Maclean: Before my hon. Friend moves on from the point made about the Minister of State going to the international conference to mix with others who have signed the protocol, ratified it and brought it into law, may I point out that the Minister will in fact mix with very few people—the presidents of Uzbekistan, New Zealand, Monaco, Jordan, Japan and Indonesia, and the Pope?

Mr. Wilshire: I wish to talk about that point in due course, but having been to Uzbekistan with the Foreign Affairs Committee and tasted the flavour of its regime and heard something of its President, I sincerely recommend to the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office that he take some precaution against being bored out of his mind, and that he not pay too much attention to any assurance that he may be given.

Mr. Colman: The hon. Gentleman will surely agree that the UK Government should take a lead in ensuring

that the world becomes less threatening, and in non-proliferation. On that basis, does he support the Minister's visit to the review conference on the non-proliferation treaty; and will he provide leadership by ensuring that we ratify the protocol ahead of the meeting?

Mr. Wilshire: All will be revealed to the hon. Gentleman as my speech unfolds. Other Members may not know what I do about the hon. Gentleman, and they may have thought that he was about to say something about the Holy See. He and I both happen to be Methodists, so I knew that he would not, but I shall clarify my position on his other points in due course.

Mr. Forth: I hope that my hon. Friend will not be seduced by the invitation offered by the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), and that he will agree that it is much more important to scrutinise the Bill properly and get it right than to boost the ego of a minor, junior Minister who is footling off to a ridiculous conference to exchange ludicrous pleasantries with lots of other self-important people.

Mr. Wilshire: I have disclosed to the House the masonic-like links between myself and the hon. Member for Putney, but the Methodist Church is a broad one; its members have many points of view. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on many matters, and that is one of them.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he is not conducting Question Time. He should make some progress on his speech because other hon. Members are trying to catch my eye.

Mr. Wilshire: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me your protection from my hon. Friends and from the hon. Member for Putney. I shall indeed do as you suggest.

Although the Bill is largely non-controversial—

Mr. Forth: Nonsense.

Mr. Wilshire: I said "largely". There are, none the less, some huge reservations about the detail of the measure that have not yet been mentioned.

We need to consider three matters before deciding whether the Bill should be read a Second time. The first partly relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Putney. Will the Bill help to make the world a safer place? We must face up to that question and we must put the measure into the general context of nuclear control and disarmament. Before we vote, we must ask whether the measure is key to making progress on those matters or whether it is merely a sideline.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill must be a sideline? It is not merely that only eight countries have ratified the agreement, but other countries such as the Russian Federation, the Ukraine, Belarus, North Korea, Libya, Israel, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Within the recollection of the Chair, that list has already been read out; there is no need for us to hear it again.

Mr. Wilshire: I shall not prejudge the question of whether the measure is a side show. I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) to permit me to develop my arguments and then to make up his mind, before he votes, whether the Bill is at the heart of the progress that we should be making.

The second point that we must consider is that if the answer to my first question were "yes"—if the House judged that the Bill would enable us to make progress—we ought then to ask whether the Bill is really the right way to do so. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst posed many questions but, as you have pointed out, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we cannot hold a detailed debate at this stage, so I shall merely suggest which details should be considered and which questions should be debated in Committee.

The third general point—on human rights—was touched on by my right hon. Friend. Whatever judgment we make as to whether the human rights issues are such that the Bill should not be read a Second time, no one in the House would seriously argue that there are no human rights concerns to be addressed before we make that decision. We must acknowledge that the arguments advanced by my right hon. Friend raised some genuine concerns as to human rights. We must decide whether those concerns are more or less important than the nuclear issues raised by the Bill and the progress that is being attempted with it.

That is the approach that we should take on human rights, because the details—as your ruling made clear, Mr. Deputy Speaker—on those concerns are a matter for Committee and for Report. However, the general principle—whether or not we have heard enough about those overall concerns—ought to suggest that we do not give the Bill a Second Reading, because it abuses human rights so fundamentally that no justification can override that matter.

Mr. Bercow: Does not the answer to my hon. Friend's question depend on the content of the regulations under which the powers in the Bill will be exercised? As that is a material consideration when making a judgment as to the acceptability or otherwise, in principle, of the Bill, would it not be helpful if the Government were to inform us, before the conclusion of the debate, whether the statutory instrument, or instruments, in question would be subject to the negative or the affirmative procedure?

Mr. Wilshire: That is an important point. The Minister has been scribbling furiously throughout the contributions to the debate; I am sure that he will have noted it.

Dr. Howells: My handwriting is not curious; it is perfectly legible and always has been.

Mr. Wilshire: I am disappointed; I thought we had saved the Minister the trouble of having to write down yet another question that he will have to answer. Furthermore, I think that he misheard me. I hope that *Hansard* will record that I said that he was furiously writing, not that he was curiously writing. I do not think that he has ever written to me, so I do not know what his writing is like. However, perhaps his response explains why he referred to grunting earlier, when you were not in the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker; the Minister may not be hearing accurately, although he seemed to be having problems with his glasses earlier.

[Mr. Wilshire]

I want to consider the Bill in context. In his opening remarks, the Minister said that he wanted the Bill to be passed before the start of the review conference in New York later this month. In that case, we need to ask the following questions: what are the issues for the non-proliferation treaty in New York, and how does the Bill link to what the Minister hopes to achieve from the conference? We need to be clear about the fact that the Bill arises from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty; that is the context for the Bill. We must also be aware that the treaty is only one among a range of nuclear weapon controls and reduction initiatives that we need to take into account. That is why I asked whether the Bill was the right way to progress or whether we should be taking an interest in some of the other initiatives.

A key activity resulting from the NPT is the fact that the United Nations has negotiated safeguard agreements with a range of member states. I shall not re-read the list, but we need to understand that we are dealing with a UN-driven activity as a result of which several states have signed such agreements. The list is long, although some significant countries have not signed up. However, we should note that Iraq has signed up to that UN initiative, so it would seem that the current agreements are inadequate. I am sure that we would all agree on that. That is why I have no difficulty with the Minister's point that we need to do something. There is clear evidence that the way we tackled the matter in the past has not brought the results for which we hoped; I do not quarrel with him on that point.

The House should be aware of the curious fact that, unlike non-nuclear weapons states, which are under some obligation if they have signed the NPT, the nuclear weapons states are not under a binding obligation to have signed an agreement in the first place. The Minister has not touched on that point. I should be grateful if he, or somebody else, told me why the five countries that are most able to supply material to non-nuclear weapons states are those that are exempted from an obligation under the NPT.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Does my hon. Friend see a parallel between that point and permanent membership of the UN Security Council? In effect, international treaties—like international organisations—have to take the facts of the military situation into account. The NPT regime was constructed—as was the UN—in the light of the fact that those five countries have nuclear weapons. The idea is to take that salient fact into account while building up a regime that will have some effect.

Mr. Wilshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that helpful point but, irrespective of his impeccable logic I still find it curious that the very five countries that are best able to supply to non-nuclear weapons states the material that they need—and hence to cause problems for the rest of the world—are left to make a voluntary agreement with the United Nations on this matter.

It is to the great credit of this country and Governments of all political persuasions—I do not seek to make a party political point—that we have entered into voluntary agreements of the sort that we are discussing. We have to understand that because we made a voluntary agreement in the first place, we are in the same position again in that we are volunteering to sign an additional protocol. It is to the Government's credit that once again we are prepared voluntarily to do what other countries are not prepared to do even though they are obliged to do so.

Mr. Maclean: It is only fair to point out that although we are prepared to sign up voluntarily, once again our volunteering is strictly limited to civil nuclear installations and research facilities; the Bill and the protocol do not apply to military nuclear activities.

Mr. Wilshire: I agree, and one of the issues that I want to address later in my speech is whether the additional protocol will make any difference. My right hon. Friend makes a valid point that the Bill does not go as far as some of us would like. That does not undermine my statement that it is to this country's credit that we have gone this far, but he properly says that the Government could go even further if they wanted to. There is nothing to stop us volunteering to do whatever we think is in the interests of world peace and world disarmament.

Dr. Lewis: I hesitate to correct my hon. Friend, but could he be a little more careful and not equate the concept of world peace with that of world disarmament? Often the one is not served by the other.

Mr. Wilshire: I could not have put it better myself. I stand accused of sloppy speech making, for which I apologise to my hon. Friend and the House. He captures a sentiment that I often express to other people. If the *Hansard* reporters could go back and correct that point, my speech would make much more sense along those lines.

It must be made clear that even if we went further than the voluntary agreement, we would be the only ones doing so. What difference would we make if others were not co-operating? If such agreements are to be effective, and if the Bill is to make a difference to world disarmament, it is important that every country that is a signatory to the United Nations charter should do the same as us. I wonder to what extent we can go on making such gestures without asking whether everybody else is following or whether they are ignoring those gestures when it suits them. I think the latter.

We have to ask ourselves why, despite what we have done, there is growing concern throughout the world about progress on nuclear weapons control and disarmament. When the process started in the 1970s, there was huge hope, but that has begun to dissipate. Before we give the Bill a Second Reading, we have to ask whether it will help to get the process moving again at the speed that we desire.

If I recall correctly, an hon. Member asked whether this was a case of good boys making gestures to make themselves feel good. Does such legislation make good boys better, while rogue states carry on regardless and laugh at us for making gestures?

Dr. Lewis: In support of what my hon. Friend—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I could help the hon. Gentleman. He has developed the habit of addressing the hon. Member to whom he is speaking; he should always address the Chair.

Dr. Lewis: I beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I take it that you refer to the direction in which I am facing rather than my terms of address, because I have endeavoured to use the correct ones.

Does my hon. Friend realise that his remarks are supported by the fact that in 1992 we had the revelation that the biological weapons convention, which was concluded in 1972, shortly after the NPT, was systematically flouted by the Soviet Union, as it then was? While western democracies disarmed in accordance with the convention's provisions, the Soviet Union exploited their disarmament by redoubling its efforts to acquire lethal systems.

Mr. Wilshire: Those are very important points. I intended to come on to them, but they have been well made by my hon. Friend, so I will not need to go into detail in that part of my speech.

Mr. Savidge: Surely the very point of the intervention by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) is that there was insufficient verification of adherence to that particular treaty. That is why we require verification, which the Bill tries to supply.

Mr. Wilshire: I said at the outset, and will say again as I develop my points, that I have no objection in principle to that objective in this Bill or any other. However, the verification that the hon. Gentleman wants has to apply to every signatory state, and not only to the good boys who are trying to be better.

Mr. Maclean: Surely the point that my hon. Friend is making is that either we have a protocol with no teeth which everyone signs without proper verification, or we have a protocol such as that in the Bill which has teeth and includes verification, but which will simply not be signed by the countries that we want to sign it. Some of us suspect that the Bill is a gesture, despite its teeth, because the countries that we need to inspect will not touch the protocol with a bargepole.

Mr. Wilshire: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. One of the tests that we have to apply before we vote tonight is whether, having listened to contributions by hon. Members on both sides of the House, we think that the Bill is window dressing or whether we believe that it will make a difference. We have to look back to the beginnings of the NPT and be clear in our minds about its basic objectives so that we can ask whether the Bill advances them.

The NPT was based on the two principles of nuclear weapons states disarming and other states not seeking to acquire the weapons that nuclear weapons states would get rid of. We need to ask ourselves what progress has been made before we can decide whether the Bill will help. The NPT started out with five nuclear weapons states and the rest of the world was non-nuclear. We now know for certain that the five have become seven and there are question marks over other countries—some are probable and some are possible nuclear weapons states.

We need to know where we stand with countries such as Israel, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya and Syria. Dare I suggest that although the current Government of South Africa have renounced nuclear weapons, there is still a question mark about what happened in the past and whether they know the whole story? I mean that as no criticism; I just put that point into the pot. We started with five nuclear weapons states; we know that we have seven, but the number could be significantly higher.

We have to decide whether we have made progress and ask why non-nuclear weapons states are becoming restive. They notice that progress on the disarmament agreements entered into by the nuclear weapons states has slowed down and is not as fast as they would have hoped. They also notice that the United States is setting up a national missile defence system, which leads certain countries to believe that they need to acquire nuclear weapons, or to develop more weapons, to counter it.

That is the context of the non-proliferation treaty—the point that we have reached. The Minister tells us that the Bill is essential to advance the non-proliferation treaty. Given the worries that I have mentioned, is the measure as central and urgent as he wants us to believe it is? He will no doubt address that question in his winding-up speech.

We must be sure that the Bill will help to reassure non-nuclear weapons states—otherwise we will not encourage them to turn their backs on developing their own nuclear weapons. We know that the safeguard agreements to which we and many other countries have signed up have not stopped the clandestine development of nuclear weapons. We discovered that only too clearly during the Gulf war. We then discovered what had been going on in Iraq.

Mr. Colman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He points out that the previous safeguards agreement did not give the International Atomic Energy Agency the right to search for and identify nuclear weapons in Iraq, despite the fact that Iraq was a signatory. Does that not clearly show the need for the additional protocol to be put in place and made to apply to all the countries that do not claim to have nuclear weapons?

Mr. Wilshire: I would not go that far down the track with the hon. Gentleman. I accept that we need to do something, but I have some doubts about whether the Bill meets that need. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that safeguard agreements patently have not worked. There can be no dispute about that, since we discovered what went on in Iraq, and have subsequently discovered what has been going on in North Korea. In those cases, there can be no argument about the fact that the current arrangements have failed, and we do not know whether they may also have failed in other countries.

We must ask ourselves whether the Bill will increase the chances of detection and prevention: I have my doubts. When the Minister was challenged, he said that he thought it would do what was necessary. One of the reasons that he gave was that the operators are happy with the terms of the Bill. I wanted to intervene on the Minister at the time, but although he took several other interventions, I did not get the chance. I make no criticism of the hon. Gentleman for that.

I was not impressed with the idea that the operators who were to be inspected were happy. If I were an operator who was up to no good, and the Minister presented the details to me and asked whether they were okay, and I spotted a huge great loophole, I would still smile quietly to the Minister and say, "I am delighted, Minister. I'll sign that with pleasure." The fact that the operators are happy does not get me any further in deciding whether I want to vote with the Minister or against him tonight.

[Mr. Wilshire]

The Minister also said that he was happy with the Bill. I hope that he will tell us when he replies how he reached that contented state. I am not a nuclear physicist. I am not sure whether he is, but if he is, he will have understood all the arguments. I, as a layman, have struggled, and it would not mean much to the House if I said that I was happy.

I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us who or what led him to his present state of happiness; who offered him the advice that persuaded him to back the Bill; and whether those who gave him that advice had any vested interest in the nuclear industry. If they have links to an operator, they will have said, "Minister, you can be happy." The operators may have seen a loophole, as may the experts, if they were wearing two hats.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Is there not a further difficulty? Whereas the civil operators in this country have no intention, one hopes, of trying surreptitiously to flout the provisions of the non-proliferation treaty, they are not best placed to judge whether the Bill will close the loopholes that could be exploited by operators in other countries who would be minded to try to dodge the provisions of the NPT.

Mr. Wilshire: That is a valid point. I assume that most or all of the additional protocols being negotiated will contain broadly the same provisions, so a loophole in the United Kingdom would be a loophole in North Korea or Iraq. That reinforces the argument that it is wrong to accept that the operators are content, in whichever country.

As well as considering the NPT, we must consider the Bill in the context of other issues arising out of nuclear control and disarmament. By focusing on the Bill and the issues under the NPT, we may be suggesting that other initiatives are less important, because we are not giving time tonight to them. Should the comprehensive test ban treaty be given greater priority than the Bill gives to the non-proliferation treaty?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot discuss that on Second Reading of this Bill, which deals with the control of civil nuclear power.

Mr. Wilshire: The issue that we are discussing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the proliferation of nuclear weapons. We may be discussing the inspection of civil facilities, but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Precisely. That is what we are discussing in the context of the Bill, and I advise the hon. Gentleman to stick with it.

Mr. Wilshire: I will do that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but the House is being invited to make up its mind whether the Bill is the correct measure that we should be considering if we are trying to achieve a safer world, which is what the debate is about—whether we should focus on the NPT, which is the origin of the Bill, or whether Parliament should use its time to discuss other measures. I believe that that is relevant.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have ruled accordingly.

Mr. Wilshire: If that is so, I sincerely hope that when the House—

Mr. Gerald Howarth: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I note your ruling, but may I draw to your attention the fact that, on Second Reading in another place, the Minister referred extensively to the NPT? The Bill arises out of the non-proliferation treaty in the sense that it applies to those states that are not—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not argue with the ruling that I have given. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) was trying to move on to quite another subject, and my ruling applied to that. I call Mr. Wilshire.

Mr. Wilshire: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I readily accept your ruling about the test ban treaty. I anticipate that the references that I believe should be made to the anti-ballistic missile treaty would come within the same ruling, but perhaps you will allow me to say in passing that the House should determine whether that should be given priority in relation to the Bill.

With regard to the NPT and the Bill, we are seeking to prevent the spread from countries that produce to countries that do not produce. The Bill sets out to achieve better verification and inspection. We should consider whether it would be more helpful to address the production of fissile material wherever it is produced, than to say that we know where it is produced and that we will make sure that it does not spread. We could usefully be saying to ourselves that, rather than trying for more verification and inspection of facilities in countries that we know are already capable of producing fissile material, we ought to be trying to do something about the stalled debate—as I understand it, it has been stalled since about 1996—about a treaty to prevent such production.

We must also put the Bill into the context of current international security. We cannot divorce what we are doing—however much of a gesture it may be—from that. We must apply the test of whether, if we are concerned about world security, the Bill is the best way in which to act. I see that you are anxious, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I do not stray. I shall therefore simply flag up two points and not develop them, although I believe them to be relevant.

In the context of what has happened in Kosovo and Chechnya, is an additional protocol likely to make the world a safer place? The issue that I would explore, if it were in order for me to do so, would be whether rogue states were learning that it is worth signing up to the protocol and then ignoring its provisions—because a country such as Russia, which has nuclear weapons, can get away with human rights abuses whereas a country that does not have such weapons cannot. We must take that issue into account when we vote on whether the Bill represents the right priority.

In pursuing such an approach to disarmament, we must also consider what is happening in the United States, with its international missile defences. If I understand the

Government's thinking, we are about to support the United States in that matter. Certainly, my Front-Bench team suggested that it would support that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not see how that can relate to civil nuclear power in this country.

Mr. Wilshire: I of course accept your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker, although I would again point out that that issue was addressed from the Front Bench at the beginning of the debate. I would like to join that debate, but, obviously, I accept your ruling. I merely flag up the point that, if one country's system might force rogue states to flout the terms of the additional protocol, perhaps the best way of stopping proliferation is to put pressure on countries such as the United States not to do things that will provoke other countries into ignoring such matters.

The Bill enables the Government to fulfil an obligation to which they have already committed themselves. The Government have already signed the additional protocol and, from reading Government briefing papers, I think that that raises a couple of issues on which hon. Members have not yet touched in any detail, but which I seek to mention. Although, again, I will not explore the issue, such action shows that the Government of the day may sign a treaty, agreement or protocol without any reference to the House. Can that be right? Ultimately, in Committee and on Report, all that we will be able to get our teeth into is whether the Bill is the right way of doing what the Government have already done. That gives me the chance to flag up yet again the point that one of the things that is wrong with the way in which we govern ourselves is that treaties do not come before the House as they should.

The other thing that I noticed when reading the explanatory memorandum and information in the Library is that we were not able to sign the additional protocol until the EU Council of Ministers had approved it. The House must consider whether we should have to go cap in hand to Brussels to be allowed to make arrangements in relation to something that is so vital to our sovereignty and the defence of the nation as nuclear defence and capability. That is a monstrous arrangement, which is tucked away in the footnotes but should be highlighted so that people may understand. We could not even have gone as far as debating the Bill if the Council of Ministers had not already said, "It is all right by us; now you go ahead and do something about it." That is a scandal.

One other preliminary issue that we must consider is whether we are able to justify such use of time. As has been mentioned, of the 193 members of the United Nations, just 45 have signed up thus far to an additional protocol. Of those, only eight have brought it into force. The list comprises an odd bunch of very serious players on the world stage on such issues—one would expect Australia and New Zealand to sign up to it—and others, to which my right hon. and hon. Friends have referred, whose signatures do not add any weight to the argument for our signing up as quickly as possible.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if this issue has been raised already, but it occurs to me that Ghana's signing up to the protocol ought to be questioned. In what possible activity could the Ghanaians be involved that might pertain to non-military nuclear fuel? Does my hon. Friend know?

Mr. Wilshire: As I said to another of my hon. Friends, I am good at a number of things, but knowing what goes on in Ghana is not one of them, so I cannot add to my hon. Friend's point.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Wilshire: Perhaps my hon. Friend is an expert on the matter.

Dr. Lewis: Far from being able to answer the question, I want to ask my hon. Friend another one. Is it not curious that so many countries, after such an amount of time, have not yet signed up to the protocol? I wonder what is holding them back—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are in danger of repetition, and I am not prepared to allow that much further. The rules about tedious repetition extend from one speaker to another and are not just confined to the person who is addressing the House.

Mr. Wilshire: I take that point entirely, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I turn to the Bill itself. One thing that we can all say about it is that it is short. I sincerely hope that the House is grateful for that. I wish, as I am sure do other hon. Members, that more Bills had only 12 clauses. It would make life a great deal simpler and we would have better legislation. Thank goodness, as far as I can see from the explanatory notes, the Bill before us only seeks to do four things, which must be something of a record for a Government Bill. I for one am happy on this occasion to applaud the Government for that. I do not say that easily; I try not to applaud them too often—but we are grateful for Bills like this.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will forgive me for saying that, of the Bill's four objectives, three are relatively non-controversial—although my right hon. Friend rightly referred to the details. The fourth objective is most certainly controversial.

As my right hon. Friend demonstrated, although the Bill is short and to the point, the protocol is a wholly different matter. The protocol runs to eleven and a quarter pages of turgid text and twenty-three and a half pages of annexes which I find it incredibly difficult to get my mind round. I wonder whether anybody is any wiser than I am about the explanatory note half way down page 18 of the protocol, which states:

> The materials used for centrifuge rotating components are:
>
> (a) Maraging steel capable of an ultimate tensile strength of 2.05×10^9 N/m^2 (300,000 psi) or more.

There is more; there is much more like that. I hope that the Minister will tell us what it means, because I'm blowed if I know. Yet we are being asked to say that it is right to sign up to such turgid stuff.

Although my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made a series of points about the protocol, you made a ruling about detail, Mr. Deputy

[Mr. Wilshire]

Speaker, so I shall content myself with saying that if I were not subject to your ruling, I would raise 10 items that my right hon. Friend did not mention. I would have liked to consider those in some detail, but I shall simply give notice that 10 questions require an answer. If the Bill gets a Second Reading, I shall ensure that they are asked in Committee or on Report. If I am not a member of the Committee, I shall raise them on Report.

The Minister may genuinely have hoped that the Bill would become law before Easter, but he was being wildly optimistic. Perhaps it will be law by Easter 2001. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not too disappointed. I shall not burden the House with details of the 10 questions now, but I shall raise them later.

Mr. Forth: In fairness to the Minister, we were told that he did not want the Bill rushed through in an unseemly manner. He was thinking of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), who was going to attend an important conference—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We have already heard that many times.

Mr. Wilshire: I have anxieties about the protocol, but the Minister, hon. Members and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be relieved to know that I have fewer questions about the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst was so effective and efficient in going through the detail before you made your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that he raised all the points that I was going to make.

I see that the Minister is poised with his pen. I shall therefore refer him to clause 4(2), which provides that an authorised officer may appear "at any reasonable hour." I am suspicious of such phrases. They get into legislation only to make money for solicitors and barristers, who can argue about what constitutes a reasonable hour. I hope that the Minister will give that serious thought. An authorised officer can either go somewhere or he cannot. Of course, that is to prejudge whether it should be allowed to happen in the first place.

Clause 4(5) sets out

> The powers of an authorised officer who enters premises . . .

I am slightly worried about the power that paragraph (a) contains. It provides the power for the officer

> to take with him such other persons and such equipment as appear to him to be necessary . . .

That is an open invitation for the world and his neighbour to go in with hobnail boots. If an authorised officer is told, "You can take whom you like," we maximise the opportunity for people from, for example, MI5, MI6, the KGB or the CIA to get in the coach after they have persuaded the authorised officer that they need to go along. The Minister should consider that.

We should reflect on how the Bill has come about and what has led to tonight's circumstances. As I said earlier, and as other hon. Members have pointed out, the Bill is an unexpected consequence of the Gulf war. At the time of that war, we had no idea that our safeguard arrangements were inadequate. Our discovery that Iraq has been developing nuclear weapons while the agreements to which it has signed up exist means that we have to take action. We have made the same discovery about North Korea.

We must establish whether the United Nations, as an international agency, or the security services of various countries of the world extracted that information. In the case of Iraq, perhaps the armies of the world made the discovery. While there is some consensus about the need to make the agreement stronger through the protocol, we must ask about the way in which we made the discovery. If the safeguard agreements did not reveal what was going wrong, why are we confident that a United Nations-orchestrated additional protocol will do that? Perhaps it would be more sensible to ask whether we should look to our security services and those of other countries to ensure that international treaties are not breached.

We must ask ourselves whether the Bill will do the trick. If we have more information, inspectors and reporting, will the world be a safer place? I do not suggest that I know the answer, but the question must be asked.

We must consider human rights, which are relevant to the debate. You will be pleased to hear, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I shall not into detail. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst raised the matter and I shall say only that I wholly appreciate his anxieties and those of my other hon. Friends. I shall not repeat them, but I hope that the Minister has listened to them, and will not believe that we raised them spuriously.

There are genuine human rights concerns. It is proposed that international inspectors can come into the United Kingdom without the civil safeguards that we have come to take for granted over the centuries. When the Minister mentioned the subject at the beginning of the debate, he suggested that we were wrong to think of them as foreign inspectors coming into the United Kingdom. I tried to intervene, but the hon. Gentleman was too kind in giving way to everybody else, and missed my jumping up and down. He suggested that we were being paranoid by referring to foreigners and pointed out that they might be Englishmen and women. Yes, they might be cuddly Englishmen and women—

Mr. Forth: They might be Welsh.

Mr. Wilshire: No, Welsh is different. We shall stick with English because I am English and proud of it, and I believe that the suggestion that my fellow countrymen and women might carry out the inspections is relevant. The Minister was not making a fair point. He failed to tell the House that if Englishmen or Englishwomen sign up to work for the United Nations or any other international organisation, they have to give an undertaking that they will put to one side their nationality, or any bias or affection that derives from being Englishmen or women, and work as though they were internationalists. It is as if they sign up to be foreigners. The Minister failed to make that point.

Mr. Keetch: To follow the logic of the hon. Gentleman's argument, if an Englishman who joins the United Nations ceases to be English and becomes international, an Iraqi who joins the United Nations ceases to be Iraqi and becomes international. We should therefore fear none of the inspectors.

Mr. Wilshire: I leave it to the hon. Gentleman to decide whether he welcomes international inspectors,

wherever they were born. The hon. Gentleman has a right to welcome people who come in to the United Kingdom with hobnail boots, go where they will, search where and whom they will and turn places upside down in defiance of people's human rights and civil liberties. I trust that his electors will notice that. I do not agree with him.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree that there should at least be some reciprocity? People should not inspect us unless they belong to nations that have signed the agreement. That would enable us to inspect them.

Mr. Wilshire: I am sure that that is a valid point. In those circumstances, we would have to consider the additional protocols that other countries were signing.

All that said, even though the Bill is brief, it raises big issues. Its introduction is an admission that the NPT is not working as well as it should be and that the safeguard agreements that have been signed up to are unsatisfactory. The Bill is an admission of failure thus far. Its introduction also implies that the additional protocols should be our top priority. Are they the best or the only way forward? I do not know. That is for the Minister to say, but he gave no justification for that point.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, the Bill raises serious human rights matters and also diverts the attention of those who are not satisfied that that is the top priority from other crucial nuclear weapons issues that I have not been able to discuss in my brief contribution. I conclude that the Bill will probably make good boys such as us feel better, but will do little, if anything, for world peace.

8.1 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I apologise for missing the early part of the debate. I was meeting the new chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality in my capacity as secretary of the all-party race and community group, and to show my commitment to equality I missed all three Front-Bench speeches. I apologise to those Members and to the Speaker, who has responsibility for upholding the conventions of the House.

Chunks of the speech of the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) were interesting. He asked the key question, "Will the Bill make the world a safer place."? The answer is an unequivocal yes. I do not mind scrutiny being applied by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—I did the same from the Opposition Benches—but the Opposition should not lose the overview of the Bill's purpose. What is the alternative to non-proliferation and treaties authorising verification and what would we get if we dismantled those treaties? It would be nuclear weapons chaos—a free for all. There would be more rogue states because there would be no treaty to contain them. There would be greater danger to us and greater risk of war, and it would be more likely that nuclear weapons would be used.

I give the example of North Korea, which wanted to opt out of the non-proliferation treaty. Only United Nations pressure, which persuaded it to sign up, made a difference. I support the principles of the Bill, which strengthen the international non-proliferation regulation and verification system.

Mr. Fabricant: Surely the hon. Gentleman accepts that the treaty will have no impact unless the rogue states become signatories. Will he explore the possibility of applying sanctions, although I do not know what sort, to what the UN would call rogue states—North Korea and even Libya, for example—that have so far not signed the treaty?

Mr. Cohen: I am not in favour of sanctions, which lead to all sorts of problems. Iraq is an example of that. It is better to have a treaty system in place so that rogue states can be included and encouraged to sign. If there were no treaty system, there would be no incentive and no pressure to sign up to anything, and that would lead to more rogue states.

As a long-standing supporter of controls on nuclear weapons and the materials that could be used to make them, I support the strengthening of nuclear safeguards carried out by the International Atomic Energy Agency. It is imperative that those strengthened safeguards are applied equally across the globe and I am proud to see a Labour Government helping to enhance the global effort to stop nuclear proliferation.

As a long-standing supporter of the goal of global nuclear disarmament, I am keen for the nuclear weapon states—the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, France and China—to be covered by stricter safeguards arrangements. The hon. Member for Spelthorne made the interesting point that there was dissilusion in non-nuclear weapons states because the nuclear weapons states have not been seen to make enough progress. Subjecting them to stricter safeguards arrangements is a way of making a bit more progress.

Nuclear safeguards form an important part of the international verification measures that will be required when we achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. The more experience of verification measures that all those states acquire, the more confident they will eventually become in moving to a world free of nuclear weapons. The Bill is a good measure, but a few matters could be tightened up. The most significant of the issues that I want to raise is Crown immunity, which has been discussed previously. In the 1980s, Lord Ashley said that a lot of Crown immunity should go from legislation. The previous Government, under the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), introduced the citizens charter, which recognised the problem that legislation did not always cover Government activities. In a written answer, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), who was then President of the Board of Trade, stated:

> An Act of Parliament is presumed not to bind the Crown unless the contrary intention is clearly stated, or there is a necessary implication that the Crown is to be bound . . . Crown immunity is being . . . reduced, as legislative opportunities arise.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 1995; Vol. 262, c. 376W.]

We could have expected Crown immunity to go gradually as opportunities arose, but that is not the case here. I ask a simple question: why is there no provision to bind the Crown? Duties and obligations are placed on people inside and outside government, but leaving the Government's legal status in doubt would profoundly weaken the Bill. What would happen if a country with a reputation such as Iraq, Iran or Libya were to pass similar legislation? What if Colonel Gaddafi were to say, "Yes, we have implemented legislation for strengthened safeguards, but of course it applies only to Government

[Mr. Cohen]

operations on a voluntary basis. The Government can ignore the legislation if they want."? The British Government would be apoplectic.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is always courteous in giving way. Is not it more likely that Colonel Gaddafi would say, "Britain has implemented legislation with regard only to civil installations and it is still keeping inspectors out of military installations. I wish to copy the great example that the British Government have set."?

Mr. Cohen: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, although progress is made step by step and the Bill is an important step forward. I support his suggestion that it should apply to military establishments as well, which would tighten up things for other countries.

Binding the Crown would also allow for independent judicial tests to establish whether the Government had acted in compliance with the legislation. That is important to ensure that Britain not only complies with this important non-proliferation measure, but is seen to comply with it, and that is a positive signal to send to the rest of the world. Conversely, not do so would send such a damaging signal to the rest of the world that we could lose many of the political benefits that strengthened safeguards could bring.

If another country alleged that Britain was not complying with the strengthened safeguards measures, how would it seem to the rest of the world if it had correctly stated that the Bill did not remove Crown immunity? That would depict this country in an unfair light. However, the remedy is simple. Standard clauses on binding the Crown appeared in legislation as diverse as the Food Safety Act 1990 and the Chemical Weapons Act 1996. Indeed, Crown immunity was lifted from atomic weapons research establishment, Aldermaston, in April 1993.

There is no reason why such a provision should not be in the Bill. In fact, I cannot understand why it has been left out. I am not a suspicious person by nature, but if the Government were to resist the inclusion of a standard clause on binding the Crown I would wonder what was behind it. I would support a Bill that bound the Crown and did not allow Crown immunity in this respect. I shall be interested in the Minister's response to that.

I applaud the Government for including the provision in clause 7. It is almost identical to the amendment that I proposed to the Chemical Weapons Bill, which made it an offence for someone knowingly or recklessly to make a false or misleading statement to an inspector. I am glad that the Government support that. It has been a long-fought battle to get such a provision in arms control legislation. I first raised the question of making it an offence to give false information to inspectors when the House debated the Bill that gave effect to the conventional armed forces in Europe treaty in 1991. My amendment to the Chemical Weapons Bill was accepted by the previous Government in 1995.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his usual courtesy in giving way. Will he explain to the House how this provision would take effect in countries that are not democracies? If a misleading statement were made to one of the inspectors in Iraq or in some other such undemocratic country, what sanction would be imposed against that country?

Mr. Cohen: That is an interesting point. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about, for example, the Soviet Union not complying with agreements during the cold war, although I suspect that there was non-compliance on both sides. When the Soviet Union was found to be in breach, the United States took it up with the Soviets. That is one good thing that could be done. Even then, the United States thought it better to have the Soviet Union on board for such treaties than to have the treaties wiped out. I know that that does not satisfy the hon. Gentleman, but it is much better to have countries signed up to these treaties, which can then be strengthened in a step-by-step approach, than not to have them at all.

Opposition Members have raised the issue of searches being carried out by people of a different sex—a different gender. That is not right, and it could create problems. However, the problem could be dealt with simply. I hope that the Government will consider amending clause 4(7), which states:

> No constable shall, by virtue of subsection (6)(b), search a person of the opposite sex.

It could state that "no person shall, by virtue of subsection (6)(b), search a person of the opposite sex." Such an amendment would remove the problem of a person searching someone of the opposite sex.

Mr. Fabricant: The Minister accused me of being interested only in sex, but I am interested in the rights of individuals in this country. Even if the hon. Gentleman persuaded the House to change the word from "constable" to "person", it would have no effect because clause 5 would prevent any control by the House over foreign inspectors coming into the United Kingdom.

Mr. Cohen: I understand that point, but the Bill will be the law of the land. If it said that a man could not search a woman, which is the obvious example, another woman would have to accompany the inspector. That is not unreasonable.

Mr. Maclean *rose—*

Mr. Cohen: I shall give way, but I am coming to the end of my speech.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way in his usual courteous manner. May I advise him carefully to think again about his suggestion? If he removes the word "constable" and replaces it with "person", he is not narrowing but widening the search to a range of other people who are not police officers, male or female, and are not qualified or trained in searching techniques. That may diminish the freedom of the individual, rather than enhance it.

Mr. Cohen: I do not think that that is so, because elsewhere in the protocol it provides that they should be proper, authorised inspectors—so I do not accept the right hon. Gentleman's point.

This is a good, important treaty that can be used for the future, and we should build on it. The alternative is dire. None of the Opposition Members who have spoken has said what would happen if the non-proliferation treaty were weakened or got rid of—*[Interruption.]* I apologise to the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), who does not take that position. With those few remarks, I support the Bill and recommend it to the House.

8.15 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen). That is one of the longest speeches I have heard him make in the House, but it was certainly worth listening to.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In what way can you make it possible for me to let my constituents know that the Conservative party is deliberately blocking the Bill to provide free television licences for 75-year-olds?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): That is not a point of order for the Chair.

Mr. Maclean: I would happily let the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) participate in this debate, and he could make his points in his own way, but he has not been present for any of our discussions. He was not even present for the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead, or to hear the detailed points made by Opposition Members. Fortunately for the House, and for myself, I shall be brief in this debate, because most of the main points were made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), and I want to save my main remarks for the BBC Bill, which we shall debate after this Bill. I do not want to tire myself out on this Bill, because I have important remarks—well, I consider them important, but the House may not—to make on that Bill, and I wish to save myself for that.

Much has changed while you were away from the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker—although at times you may be forgiven for thinking that not much had changed. There is now a certain consensus across the House. One has heard of the famous Rooker-Wise amendment. I look forward, with the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead, to the Cohen-Maclean amendments on Report, which may deal with the vexed problem of searches or seek to give the Bill more teeth and deal with the problem of the inspection of military as well as civilian installations.

It was said at the start of our discussion of this important measure that this is an historic day and that the Bill is of historic importance. I shall briefly touch on the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. We are having this significant debate only because my right hon. Friend and I objected to the fact that the Government tried to bounce this measure through the private Member's Bill procedure last year. If a private Member in the top 20 in the ballot had presented this Bill, it would have had a proper Second Reading, we would have had this discussion on a Friday morning, and the Bill would have proceeded apace. Attempting to bounce it through on the nod at the end of business on a Friday was not an appropriate way to deal with important legislation that implements an international treaty, a copy of which I have in front of me, better for the purposes of information.

The Bill is historic, and we must consider whether it will make the world a safer place or whether we are deluding ourselves—and that, although the Bill and the protocol deal with crucial matters, they will nevertheless not make a jot of difference. Is it merely a gesture? If so, might that gesture persuade other countries to take a step forward and participate in nuclear non-proliferation treaties? Will it persuade them to sign up to the protocol?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that I have heard these points made many times this evening already?

Mr. Maclean: I accept that point entirely, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but at least you have not heard them from me before. This time, you have heard them in a different accent. Nevertheless, I will push on with other points, which I hope have not already been raised by any of my right hon. or hon. Friends. When one speaks late in a debate, there is inevitably a danger that the great points of principle have already been aired.

If this is an important Bill, we must ensure that the measures in it will make a difference to world peace. We have certain concerns about clause 5, which have already been touched on; we also have concerns about the protocol—the agreement signed by the British Government, and now awaiting ratification and implementation.

Article 4 of the protocol says that "any location" must be inspected by members of the International Atomic Energy Agency, or by authorised officials of the British Government. The term "any location" is very broad, and I suspect that it will be interpreted broadly in English law. Article 5 states:

> The United Kingdom shall provide the Agency with access to . . . Any place in a facility or part thereof in the United Kingdom designated pursuant to Article 78(a) of the Safeguards Agreement

and

> Any location identified under Article 2.

That refers to article 2 of this protocol, which identifies the main nuclear installations, research facilities and organisations where one might expect to find nuclear power and nuclear material of some sort, including nuclear processing material.

Article 5.c., however, states that this can also include

> Any location specified by the Agency, other than locations referred to in paragraphs a. and b. above, to carry out location-specific environmental sampling.

That widens the scope of the Bill. We may feel little concern about officers from the IAEA or other authorised officers of the United Kingdom having the right to enter places such as Sellafield, or other places involved in nuclear reprocessing or research involving nuclear material. Article 5, however, allows agency officers to enter other locations to carry out location-specific environmental sampling.

Article 6 states that the agency may carry out activities including:

> For access in accordance with Article 5.c., collection of environmental samples and, in the event the results do not resolve the question or inconsistency at the location specified by the Agency

pursuant to Article 5.c. utilization at that location of visual observation, radiation detection and measurement devices, and, as agreed by the United Kingdom and, as appropriate, the Community, and the Agency, other objective measures.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend is presenting his argument eloquently. Does he agree that the definition is so broad that it leaves us open not only to breaches of the Official Secrets Acts, but to industrial espionage by other countries?

Mr. Maclean: I do not want to discuss breaches of the Official Secrets Acts, because I think that they fall under clause 2. I want logically to deal first with the protocol, and then with the Bill. I am not as clear-headed as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, who can speak with the Bill in one hand and the protocol in the other, and deal with both simultaneously. I think, however, that part of the Bill will allow the Secretary of State to serve notices on any person giving assistance or information that would be in breach of the Official Secrets Act.

I fear that article 6 would widen access to a range of places and activities that might have nothing to do with nuclear power, nuclear energy or nuclear research, so that location-specific environmental sampling could be carried out. My only knowledge of that relates to what happened in the Lake district after the Chernobyl incident. Many people thought that it was to do with Sellafield, but it was not. Inspectors from the Environment Department and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had to visit various sampling spots all around the area of nuclear fallout from the Chernobyl reactor and take samples. In the main, people were willing to participate and to allow the inspectors on to their land—land that was dozens of miles from Sellafield, and thousands of miles from where the incident happened. However, they had to provide access.

I can only assume, unless the Minister tells me otherwise, that the location-specific environmental sampling mentioned in the protocol actually means that. Let us suppose that the Government give the agency information about a location such as those specified in article 2. Let us suppose that they say, "We have a nuclear facility at location X." In that event, under articles 5 and 6, in order to check that material is not leaking out, or that it is the stuff that it should be—strontium 90, for instance—the agency would carry out environmental sampling at points within the vicinity of the location. It might be half a mile out, two miles out, five miles out or 50 miles out. I do not know; it is not clear.

It is obvious, however, that the experts who drafted the scientific part of the protocol have a clear idea of what location-specific environmental sampling is. I should be delighted if someone told me that I had got it wrong and told me exactly what it meant, but, unless I am challenged, I assume it means that within certain distances of certain research facilities and nuclear facilities inspectors can sample the air or the soil, or stick radioactive meters in the air, to find out whether there is any radiation about.

No doubt the agency will operate according to a set plan or a set map. That means that inspectors can say to United Kingdom citizens, "We want to monitor a nuclear facility that is five, 10, 50 or 100 miles down the road, and we want to carry out sampling from this point on your land, on your hillside, on your mountain or in your back garden." They will then have all the powers that the protocol gives them.

Perhaps it should be possible to move to someone else's mountain or back garden—someone who may be happy to co-operate or give permission. Nevertheless, it seems to me that we have built into the protocol and the Bill powers to allow agency officers to say to British citizens who have nothing to do with the nuclear industry, nuclear research or any scientific research, "We are coming on to your land for the purposes of article 5.c. of the protocol, as implemented in the Nuclear Safeguards Bill." I, for one, would like an assurance from the Minister that I am entirely wrong, because that would help to persuade me that the Bill is not as draconian as I think it is.

I would have liked to make a number of other points about the protocol, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has covered them comprehensively, I will content myself with some that he did not make in detail. Article 11 concerns the appointment of agency officials to act as safeguards inspectors. My right hon. Friend elicited from the Minister the answer that yes, the British Government have the right of veto—if we do not like Inspector Snooks from a certain country, we can reject him.

The other point that I hope the Minister will cover in his winding-up speech is: can we do that indefinitely? Can we have a large number of vetoes? Is it open-ended? Can our veto be such that we will never accept an inspector who is appointed by a certain country? We do not care how good or honest the person is. We may be certain that he is not a spy, or espionage officer appointed by that country. We may nevertheless say that we will not take inspectors from certain countries.

It may be a small point, but it would be nice to know that, unlike with juries, we can carry on objecting to inspectors from certain countries if we have reason to suspect, irrespective of how many different inspectors they give us, that they are paid officers of the intelligence services of that member state, or have connections to their own military that we might find unacceptable.

Mr. Fabricant: May I probe my right hon. Friend a little further? Does he suspect, like me, that a perfectly honourable person from a specific country, when he returns to his country, if it is non-democratic or, furthermore, has not even signed the protocol, may be blackmailed—as my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) says—or, to go further, tortured to give such information?

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend makes some good points, which I am sure that the Minister has heard and will wish to deal with in his reply. There were allegations that one of the inspectors—in fact, the chief inspector—a United States citizen inspecting the Iraqi facilities, was improperly passing information to the United States Government. The allegations were perhaps even worse: he was working in cahoots with the CIA, or some other organisation.

Considering the circumstances of that case and the trust that I have for our American allies, I would be happy if America were clever enough to place a good operative to do that job. Nevertheless, that is probably one of the few countries that I would trust to do such a thing.

If that allegation were true, other countries and Governments might try the same ploy: designating as inspectors people who have impeccable links to their equivalent of the CIA, internal security forces, espionage or spying agencies. We wish to reserve the right—I hope that the Minister will confirm that we have it—to carry on ad nauseam rejecting inspectors from a country if we suspect that they are connected to their spy agencies.

I move to article 12 and a different point from that raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst; it occurred to me as he was making his speech. These people will get visas. The article says:

> The United Kingdom shall, within one month of the receipt of a request therefor, provide the designated inspector specified in the request with appropriate multiple entry/exit and/or transit visas.

It is those visas that interest me. Let us take a hypothetical case. We grant permission for an inspector to be designated. He then receives his year-long multiple entry and exit visa. He comes with the IAEA team and does his official duty. He inspects properly—there are no questions about it. He seems to be perfectly legitimate. Then he goes home to his host country, or a country where he is a citizen and whose Government appointed him to the IAEA in the first place. A month later, he comes back to the UK—shall we say in a private capacity, not on IAEA activities—but there is total freedom of movement in this country for anyone who enters it.

That person has his multiple entry and exit visas. Is he free to enter this country without telling the British Government? Is he free to come on holiday to the Lake district? Is he free to go for a sightseeing tour around Sellafield? Is he free to indulge in private activities, shall we say, and to look around, as close as he can get, research facilities and nuclear installations in this country, without wearing the official hat of the designated inspector?

We need to know. If I were trying to run a spying operation in any foreign Government, that is the sort of chap whom I would want to send to this country. The problem arises not when he comes here with an official team, not when he tells the British Government, "I am arriving within 24 hours. Please tell the people at your nuclear installations that I will inspect X, Y and Z," and not when the Government are officially informed, but when he comes back with his multiple entry and exit visas to do some private work on his own, or with the connivance of the host Government.

If the Minister says that, on every occasion, those people must notify the British Government that they have arrived in this country, I will be pleased. I cannot see it anywhere in the legislation. It is not in the protocol. Perhaps it is built into some operating instructions that we do not have before us tonight. If that is not the case, I should like amendments in Committee or on Report saying that any of the people who have been designated as inspectors must tell the host Government on any occasion that they come to this country. That is the only way in which we can ensure that, if there are any inspectors of whom we are slightly suspicious, our security services can be notified, so that those people can be kept under proper observation, if we think that they are doing, shall we say, freebies.

As I say, I have concerns about other provisions of the protocol, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, in his customary thorough manner, has explored them in considerable detail, so I will not need to go down that route.

It is legitimate to allude to the countries that have signed up to the protocol already. We are being urged to pass the Bill rapidly, so that Britain can carry out its obligations. It has been pointed out—I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you will not consider it tedious repetition to say it—that the list is not very great.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If the right hon. Gentleman is going to remind the House of those people who have and have not signed, that point has been dealt with at least twice.

Mr. Maclean: That is why I was not going to point out the minor states that have signed the protocol. Nevertheless, the House needs to be reminded that Britain would be in a unique environment if it joined the other eight. That is a tiny handful out of the 193 countries of the UN that have not implemented the protocol. That takes us back to the key issue of principle relating to the Bill: is it worth while voting for the Bill today, and will it make a difference?

It has been said that this is an historic opportunity. I submit that the end of the cold war provided an historic opportunity to advance the cause of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. As Labour Members have said, the possibility of realising the opportunity to have less proliferation of nuclear weapons depends significantly on verification and standards. To that end, we have this protocol, and the IAEA safeguard system has been strengthened considerably since 1991, when the Berlin wall fell. Moreover, events in Iraq demonstrated the limitations of the systems that we then had in place. When we discovered Iraq's clandestine weapons development activities, it gave us many lessons for the future. I think that that is the direct forebear of this protocol.

Today, I have not heard one hon. Member on either side of the House seriously criticise the IAEA safeguards, which are acknowledged to be a credible means by which the international community can be assured that nuclear materials and nuclear facilities are being used exclusively for peaceful purposes.

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Mr. Maclean: I think that the point that my hon. Friend wishes to make is that people can be assured by the safeguards only if countries have signed up to them.

Mr. Fabricant: I simply wonder whether my right hon. Friend was persuaded by the argument so forcefully made by the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) that if we singlehandedly and—I almost hesitate to use this word in your presence, Mr. Deputy Speaker—unilaterally decide to sign the protocol, the rest of the world will sign it, too?

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. It would be naive for anyone to believe that that would happen. However, I do not accuse the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead of naivety—he simply has a confidence in certain countries that I do not share, and believes that Britain can set an example. Although I accept that Britain can set an example in many spheres, I do not believe that merely setting an example on the protocol will cause the rest of the world to rush in behind us. Fundamental interests are at stake.

[Mr. Maclean]

We can sign protocols and treaties when we are already doing the right things and our fundamental interests would not be affected by signing them. However, we have refused to sign many treaties when we thought that a signature would fundamentally affect our interests. That is one reason why the United Kingdom—under all Governments, including the current one—will not sign up to certain military nuclear treaties that we think could seriously endanger the effectiveness of our nuclear deterrent. We do not want any interference with that. I do not, however, want to address that issue. I am merely making the point that countries may sign up to things that do not matter, and that they will not always sign up to things that matter to them.

We can sign up to the protocol because it does not seriously affect our military capability. Indeed, as the protocol does not apply to the military, it could not seriously affect the military; nor does it seriously affect our nuclear capability. Clause 3 provides many more regulations and much more bureaucracy and claptrap, but the protocol will not close down any British nuclear research facility. Therefore, the Government can happily sign up to it, wear their heart on their sleeve and show that we are good guys.

Safeguards on verification and other safeguards alone cannot prevent states from acquiring nuclear material, facilities or technology. Neither can they alone ensure the physical protection of nuclear materials or facilities. However, they can—if everyone signs up to them—act as an early warning mechanism. They are the trigger that sets in motion other responses by the international community. That basic principle brings into focus the reality that the safeguard system is merely one component, albeit—as we have been saying in the debate—an important component of the global non-proliferation regime.

The essential elements of the non-proliferation regime—we are being asked to add another element to it today—have long been recognised to include: global, regional and bilateral agreement in accordance with which states commit themselves not to manufacture or possess nuclear weapons; export controls on the supply of nuclear and nuclear-related materials, technology and equipment; the convention and guidelines aimed at ensuring the physical protection of nuclear material and facilities; accelerated action towards nuclear disarmament, of course; and appropriate arrangements for global and regional security.

Although much has been achieved in putting in place those components—which together constitute the rather complex mosaic of the global non-proliferation regime—the forthcoming non-proliferation treaty review conference is likely to highlight how further progress is required. That fact tends to put this protocol into context, and helps us to come to conclusions on the Bill. Specifically, the principles of, and objectives for, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament—which are part of the package of decisions that accompanied the agreement on the NPT's indefinite extension, in 1995—will certainly draw attention to the commitments that need to be fulfilled.

As Labour Members have said today, although safeguards have evolved progressively since their inception, until recently, the IAEA safeguards system focused mainly on nuclear material and activities declared by the state. This protocol is, of course, the result of our recognition that an effective verification regime must also focus on possible undeclared material and activities. That has been a lacuna in our legislation for some considerable time.

In February 1992, the IAEA board of governors reaffirmed the agency's right to verify the correctness and completeness of the nuclear material declarations made by states. Some strengthening measures were introduced within existing IAEA members, but other key elements envisaged for the strengthened system required additional legal authority. In May 1997, the IAEA board approved a model additional protocol, which conferred on the agency additional legal authority to implement further strengthening measures. That has evolved into the protocol that we are discussing, under which states are required to provide the agency with an expanded declaration that contains information covering all aspects of their nuclear and nuclear fuel cycle activities, but relating only to civil installations, not military ones.

The agency's broader access rights are, to a large extent, linked to confirming or clarifying particular aspects of the information provided. Whereas access was previously limited to certain strategic plants in declared facilities, under the new protocol a state is required to provide access to any place on a nuclear site and to other locations—that is the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst was concerned about—where nuclear material is or may be present. The state is required to provide access to all locations that are or could be engaged in nuclear fuel cycle-related activities and, in cases in which that may not be possible, to make every reasonable effort to satisfy agency requirements without delay through other means.

Mr. Forth: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the really bothersome aspect of that is that it appears that all decisions on such matters rest with the agency? Throughout the protocol and the Bill, what is regarded as a prime location or an adjacent location is a matter for the discretion of the agency and its inspectors. That appears again and again to give them unlimited scope in their decision as to where they go to invade—and, arguably, to violate—the privacy of hitherto safe locations.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is right. I do not criticise the present Government, because the situation would be the same if the Conservatives were in power, but when Britain implements an international obligation, we always put gold knobs and bells on. The British Government are required to send information to the agency. In clauses 2 and 3, the Government and parliamentary draftsmen have ensured that under no circumstances will Britain ever be likely to be accused of missing out a single place where someone may be carrying out the tiniest bit of research that might have relevance to the nuclear industry. I suspect that British Telecom would be notified to the IAEA if it reverted to the old phones that had radioactive dials, as would a manufacturer of luminous watches, because of the radioactivity in the products or the research for them. The British Government never want to be accused of failing to implement their obligations.

Clause 2 says:

The Secretary of State may serve a notice on any person requiring him to give the Secretary of State information, or information of a description, specified in the notice.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a Committee debate. It is not right to go into such detail.

Mr. Maclean: I am sorry that I began to do so. I should not let my hon. Friends lead me astray into that detail. We shall have to spend considerable time in Committee looking at the detail of clauses 2 and 3.

Mr. Fabricant: Given the broader picture that my right hon. Friend has painted, is he aware that there will be costs for manufacturing companies as a result of the Bill's scope and the sort of companies that can be investigated under its terms? Has he noticed whether there has been any compliance cost analysis?

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend makes an important point in his own way. I shall not go into the details of clauses 2 and 3, but the House will see the space that they take up in the Bill. The Government have built in every catch-all provision that they can to ensure that they have the details of every company, business or person engaged in research on anything nuclear. That information will then be passed on to the agency.

Mr. Bercow: Given the extent of the powers that the Bill confers upon agency investigators and the fact, which will not have escaped you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we have been debating the Bill for precisely 270 minutes, it is imperative that the Minister who replies should deal in detail with the concern of many of us that aggrieved individuals should have redress against abuse of power, the opportunity for which is provided deliberately or inadvertently by the Bill.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is right but slightly ahead of me. I intended to take up that point when I turned my attention to the Bill and drew attention to the lack of a redress system for those who have been aggrieved. I do not need to deal any more with the protocol because my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst dealt with it extensively.

As I pass on to the Bill, I wish merely to point out that although the Government have signed the protocol and wish to ratify it and bring it into law, we must not think that we have made a marvellous step forward. I do not think that we have, because many challenges still remain. For example, many states that are party to the non-proliferation group have yet to conclude safeguard agreements with the agency. There may be no harm in Britain being one of the few countries to have done so, but in five years' time there may be an opportunity to initiate an Adjournment debate on these matters, and we may find that Britain is still No. 9 and that no other state has signed up.

It would be a welcome development if some of the 50 other NPG states, without the safeguard agreement in force, were to review the run-up to the April conference at the end of this week. I understand that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office will attend the April 2000 review conference, and I hope that the House will be told that having gone there, aiming to clutch the Nuclear Safeguards Act in his hand—I suspect that we shall not be able to make it an Act by Easter, but instead carrying the Bill—he will say, "We have completed Second Reading and we are now in Committee, and ratification will take place shortly." How many other Ministers from the 50 states that have failed to make progress will be able to make a similar report?

Before we judge the Bill, we want an estimate of how many other states will sign up. I do not wish to discuss individual countries or to say that we can now sleep safely in our beds because the Pope has signed up and we shall not be nuked by the Vatican, which is reassuring. However, we are entitled to know from the Minister whether the Government expect that there will be many other states following the lead that he wishes the British Government to give.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend has made a new point, which must be something of a record in the debate. He is introducing an important angle. We have been talking in terms of what the Government will want to take to the April conference. We have the unseemly spectacle of the Minister wanting to rush the proposed legislation through the House. My right hon. Friend must be correct: if we are to give the Bill a Second Reading, we should in Committee have knowledge of whether progress has been made at the international forum so that we can make a judgment about completion of the Bill's consideration. It may be that we would want to pause on Third Reading if we were not satisfied that progress was being made at great international conferences.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend, in his usual highly intelligent and erudite way, has made an exceptionally good point. One of the reassurances that I would like to hear from the Minister tonight is that he will delay going into Committee until after Easter. He would only lose one Committee session and it would not jeopardise the Bill. Or the Bill could go into Committee and the Minister could table a sittings motion for the Committee to proceed after Easter, at which point we could have a report from the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the progress that he made at the April 2000 review conference. He could also give us a list of the other countries which attended clutching their own Bills.

Mr. Bercow: Am I right in thinking that the Minister, who has been somewhat lonely on the Front Bench in the past few hours, will only by leave of the House have the opportunity to speak for a second time in replying to the debate? Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office wishes to brandish aloft at an international conference a piece of paper that testifies to the success of his Government in securing early passage of the provisions in the protocols, the least that he could do in courtesy to the House would be to offer to wind up this debate? The fact that he is not even attending our proceedings is further naked evidence of the contempt in which Ministers of this Government hold this elected House.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point in his own way. It is a point that needs repetition, but I make no accusation against the Minister who is present. He is exceptionally courteous. Indeed, I hope that the Government have not abandoned the tradition of

[Mr. Maclean]

ensuring that, if a Minister has to be present in the Chamber all day, another Minister comes in to allow him to have a break for some beans on toast. The Minister has not had the chance for refreshment all day, and that is an unfair burden on any Minister.

With regard to the substance of my hon. Friend's remarks, I cannot think of any right hon. or hon. Friend who would object to the Minister seeking the leave of the House to reply to the debate. He is a courteous Minister and I would much prefer to hear his reply than that of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office. No one on the Opposition Benches would object to the Minister seeking the leave of the House to speak again.

I turn now to the Bill itself. We need an indication of the extent of the regulations that will be required under clause 3, which will give the Secretary of State power to

> make regulations requiring persons of any description specified in the regulations to inform him that they are of such a description and to give supplementary particulars.

If I read that correctly, it means that the Secretary of State will make regulations concerning certain persons and the first thing that they will have to do is to confirm that they are the people whom the regulations are about, so that the Government know that they made the regulations broad enough.

Clause 3 is wide ranging, as is clause 2, and the Government should indicate what regulations they have in mind. I recall a time, not so long ago, when what is almost a Henry VIII measure such as this would not have got through the House, or past the other place, unless the Government produced in advance the draft regulations that they intended to make. I remember several Bills that I piloted through the House that were held up until Home Office officials had drafted in advance all the regulations that we could possible conceive of making, because the Opposition and the other place demanded to see the pig in the poke.

Dr. Howells: Which regulations is the right hon. Gentleman referring to? Draft regulations under clause 3 were put into the Library on 29 November last year. They set out what it is envisaged will be required from companies under that clause.

Mr. Maclean: I am delighted to be corrected on that and apologise for suggesting that that had not been done. The extensive material that I collected from the Library did not contain them, so I assumed that the Library did not have them. If the regulations are comprehensive and make clear what the Government want, that is excellent. I withdraw my remarks without hesitation.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend should not be too apologetic. Sackcloth and ashes are not required. The Minister will recall an intervention that I made in the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) to inquire whether the regulations would be subject to the negative or the affirmative procedure. The Minister intervened on him with a reference to his own handwriting. Does my right hon. Friend think that we should look to the negative procedure for the regulations, or to the affirmative?

Mr. Maclean: That is a good point. I assumed that the Minister would have mentioned that, if he knew about the regulations when he said that he did. However, there is no harm in apologising when one is wrong, and I was wrong about the regulations. I wish other Departments could be as forthcoming as his has been in producing draft regulations under the Bill.

Clause 4(5) states:

> The powers of an authorised officer who enters premises under the authority of a warrant under this section include power—
>
> (a) to take with him such other persons and such equipment as appear to him to be necessary.

I can understand that authorised officers might want to take with them scientific and technical help, or equipment that Sherpas are required to carry. However, subsection (6) of what I think is a permissive clause talks of

> A constable who enters premises under the authority of a warrant.

Authorised officers may have power to take whatever people they choose with them, but will constables have to comply? An authorised officer with a warrant to enter a premises may decide to take a couple of bobbies with him because he fears difficulty, or merely for the sake of appearances. When he tells the relevant chief constable that he wants officers to accompany him, do the police have the right to refuse? If the chief constable agrees, will the force be recompensed for the officers' time?

Police provision for football matches is always recompensed, as it is additional, unusual expenditure. However, the police are worried about the burdens that are placed on them, and about the vicious Government funding cuts that have caused bobby numbers to fall. Will the chief constable of my county, Cumbria, now say that he will have to close more rural police stations and take more bobbies off the beat because his officers have been summoned by authorised officers to accompany certain persons into nuclear installations or research facilities?

Clause 8 deals with the search provision, and the Minister should get his officials to look at it again. I cannot remember the rules introduced by the previous Government on searches, but they were introduced under legislation relating to the transfer of prisoners. I seem to recall that searches range from removing a person's hat or coat to removing all his or her clothing. The severest form of search is the intimate body search by police service doctors.

The Government could save themselves a problem if they specified what sort of search they mean. I assumed that it was, as with security searches at airports, a case of patting the body without asking people to remove any more clothing than a coat—without going into grubby details.

Clause 5, by far the most contentious in the Bill, deals with the powers of inspectors to come into this country and go into any private property without a warrant. Under clause 4, a warrant must be granted before British inspectors can enter British property. When we referred to foreign inspectors invading private British property, the Minister pulled us up and told us not to be disparaging about the inspectors—some of whom are British—who have an excellent reputation. I agree entirely. I have no criticism of the inspectors in the British nuclear industry or the agency officers who have been doing such work since 1946 or 1956. They have a long-standing and noble reputation of proper, thorough, decent inspection. However, our fundamental freedoms existed even before those inspectors. So, although I have no criticism of the inspectors who may enter our property, it is nevertheless

legitimate to challenge them, along with police constables, Customs and Excise officers, or any other officers who seek extraordinary rights to invade our fundamental freedoms.

The Committee considering the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill has just ended. It dealt with clauses giving draconian powers to the security service, the special intelligence service, Customs and Excise, MI5, the fisheries inspector, the Department of Health dodgy medicines inspector—even the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food egg inspector, as we discovered by accident one day. The Committee regularised their draconian powers to undertake covert surveillance, directed surveillance and, for some of the top security agencies of the state, electronic surveillance such as tapping e-mails. The Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), was extremely courteous, and meticulous in assuring the Committee that the powers for people to enter private property and bag all mail and correspondence were necessary only because there were serious issues at stake. We were told that the Home Secretary could be trusted because we could always ensure that, whenever he granted a warrant, it would be done properly, and there would be a judicial committee to check on it.

Mr. Fabricant: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Maclean: Yes, but I do not want to stray down this road because I would be on the borderline of order. Under that Bill, the powers given to the security services and the police are under warrant, and the Home Secretary has to answer for every time that they get it wrong. I cite that merely as a contrast to the powers in clause 5.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend almost answers my question. Is not the crux of the matter that MI5, MI6, GCHQ and the other agencies are answerable, directly or indirectly, to Parliament, whereas the IAEA is not?

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is right. Why do we bother having the powers in clause 4? It provides an elaborate procedure, under which British officers will have to seek a warrant and obtain judicial approval. The procedure will be the same as for any other police officers getting a warrant before going on to private property, carrying out inspections or arresting people. We have even built in those powers for MI5, MI6, Customs and Excise, the National Criminal Intelligence Service, the national crime squad, the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and other chief constables. We have built an elaborate procedure, ending with scrutiny by an independent judicial committee. Clause 4 almost emulates that, while clause 5 does not build in any safeguards.

I see the Minister's difficulty. The Government have signed up to a protocol, and the Bill must implement it. If we try to build safeguards into clause 5, that will fly in the face of the protocol of the treaty. Under the protocol, we have signed away our rights by allowing inspectors to come into this country and go on to private property without necessarily getting a judicial warrant. I understand why clause 5 must implement that in law.

It is not good that the Bill has two inconsistent clauses. British inspectors must get a warrant, but foreign inspectors—who may include British inspectors—can inspect without scrutiny.

Clause 5(5) states that a constable "may" give such assistance as an inspector may request. Does that really mean "shall"? We need to know. The phrasing suggests that the constable may not—he or she may refuse. There is a permissive power for the constable to refuse.

If, during an inspection, a constable refuses to do something that the inspector asks him to do, and the person is then charged with wilfully obstructing an inspector, does the person have a defence because the constable did not back up the agency inspector? Would that be an offence? For example, an agency inspector visits a facility accompanied by a British bobby, and the person concerned refuses to do what the inspector demands. The British bobby suggests that the person does not refuse, and the inspector then orders the British officer to compel the person to comply.

Dr. Howells: If a warrant says that a constable must be present, the police service would have to provide a PC unless there were exceptional circumstances for justifying a refusal. A constable would be expected to use his own judgment about what he should do, subject to any conditions in the warrant. However, he would be expected to provide whatever assistance was appropriate, if so requested by an authorised officer.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to the Minister for taking us forward. If the warrant specifies that a constable should be present, the police must provide an officer. However, if the warrant does not specify that, the police can refuse.

Mr. Fabricant: I wonder whether the Minister has been as helpful as he had wished. If a warrant is issued, as the Minister said—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Both the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) are falling into the trap about which I warned them earlier. These are Committee points and ought not to be pursued.

Mr. Maclean: I accept your ruling, of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but should be grateful if the Minister would reconsider clause 5(5) and (7). I shall wish to ask in Committee what would happen if an agency inspector ordered something and a British bobby thought it contrary to British law or Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 rules. The bobby might be asked to take illegal fingerprints or samples, and might refuse to do so. The person who had refused to comply, because a police officer had thought that compliance was wrong, could then be charged with having failed to co-operate with an agency inspector. That person might be charged with an offence, which the police did not consider to be an offence, merely on the say-so of the agency inspector.

I wish to turn to information held electronically. I have spent much time discussing encryption over the past few weeks in the Standing Committee on the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. Clause 4(5)(c) of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill creates a power for an authorised officer to

> require any information which is held in electronic form and is accessible from the premises to be produced in a form in which he can read and copy it.

[Mr. Maclean]

Let us suppose that the information is encrypted, and that the person who holds it claims to have lost his key. Under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, that person will receive an automatic two-year sentence for not producing the encrypted material—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is repeating points that he has told us he made in Standing Committee. Clearly, by his own admission, those are Committee points, and I ask him to move on.

Mr. Maclean: I shall certainly move on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, although I was not aware of having mentioned encryption previously. I thought that I was on safe ground as I could not recall anyone having mentioned it.

My other points are points of detail, and I need not trouble the House with them tonight.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend is an expert on the big picture. Given the considerable anxieties expressed about the disparity between clauses 4 and 5, it would be helpful if the Minister told us how he would respond if the House did not approve the Bill's Second Reading. In that eventuality, would he talk to his international colleagues and produce a revised Bill, or would he abandon the project altogether?

Mr. Maclean: That is a valid question. I do not oppose the Bill; I do not think that any of my hon. Friends does either. However, we have deep concerns about clause 5 because we do not like to give draconian powers, without review or judicial oversight, to inspectors of any nature. I should not want to give those powers to my local VAT inspector, never mind to international inspectors of any agency.

I do not oppose the Bill, but I challenge the Government to prove that it is essential and will make a great difference. It has about it the aura of a gesture, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said. If it were vital to nuclear non-proliferation, the Government would have introduced it themselves in 1997, soon after they were elected. They could have introduced it in 1998, but instead it was tacked on to the end of the Order Paper on a Friday morning when we were dealing with important private Member's Bills. My right hon. Friend or I objected to it because we assumed that it was a measure of no consequence. We thought that the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) was trying to bounce through a Bill that he had dreamt up off the top of his head, and that that would have been an abuse of the procedures of the House. Today, we have heard the Minister say that it is vital—

Dr. Julian Lewis: Historic.

Mr. Maclean: Indeed, the Government say that it is an historic measure that will make a great difference. If it would make a difference now, surely it would have made a bigger one two years ago. Perhaps if it had been introduced then as a Government measure, more than eight countries—the House knows which ones, and I shall not recite the list again—would have signed up to the protocol.

If we are to make the gesture of passing the Bill, and if Britain intends to signify to the rest of the world how good it is, we must bear in mind that it applies only to civil activities, not defence-related ones. We have rightly said to IAEA inspectors and to other countries in the protocol, "You can draw up this protocol, chums, and we can all go to the international review in April and congratulate ourselves on passing it, but your inspectors can keep their noses out of our military nuclear facilities. We are not having any foreign inspectors wandering around them. We are not signing up to any of that."

I defend the Government for that attitude—just as I defended the previous Government and shall defend any future Government who say that, in the world in which we live, our military nuclear capability is vital to the security and peace of our nation. I trust our British inspectors to ensure that such matters are properly carried out.

However, despite the fact that the Government will not give the protocol any remit over military establishments, we should not pat ourselves too much on the back, because inspectors from foreign countries can wander around all our other nuclear facilities. They can go into all the little labs in Cambridge and elsewhere—inspecting, detecting and picking up paperwork on all the minutiae of civil nuclear power—while we say how good, open and up-front we are and that the rest of the world should follow our lead.

The Gaddafis of this world—the Libyas, Iraqs, Indias, Pakistans and all the other countries that might have a nuclear capability—will not be persuaded by countries that say, "Come and inspect all our civil nuclear establishments, but keep your noses out of our military ones." We are no more moral than they are, but I am happy with our position. I should not like the Government to extend the Bill's provisions to our military nuclear facilities.

9.22 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am delighted to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) in the debate. He rightly referred to the provenance of the Bill. Many right hon. and hon. Members who take seriously the principles of our democratic system will be concerned by the fact that the measure started out as a private Member's Bill. The Government made a mistake by introducing it in that way; they now realise that it would have been better to have presented it as a Government Bill. Private Members' Bill should be reserved for issues such as hedgerows, on which the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions might be anxious to introduce a measure that would not be appropriate as main Government business.

However, the debate has permitted us to have the pleasure of the company of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow): the Minister is a most assiduous Member. I am sorry that I was not in the Chamber to hear his opening speech, or his explanation as to why the Government were unable to make a statement to the House on car competition policy. I pay tribute to his belief in the House and to the fact that he has listened attentively to all the arguments in the debate.

Mr. Bercow: May I echo my hon. Friend's tribute? The Minister is liked and admired on both sides of

the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] As the Minister will have the burden of securing the Bill's passage, would it not be appropriate if he, rather than the significantly less popular Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, were to have the pleasure of attending the celebrated international conference?

Mr. Howarth: Enough of that—we have done the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs quite enough harm already. I like him enough not to want to inflict further damage. Although I missed his opening remarks, I was able to study the words of Lord McIntosh of Haringey, who moved the Bill's Second Reading in the other place last November.

During that debate, a noble Lord described the powers in the Bill as draconian. Furthermore, he said:

> One of those whose advice I took on the Bill said: "We are all in favour of the most draconian measures to protect the nuclear non-proliferation treaty".

That was said not by a Conservative peer but by Lord Wallace of Saltaire, who speaks for the Liberal Democrats. He is a professor of international relations at the London school of economics and a former director of studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs. I make that point to demonstrate that he has made a lifetime study of international affairs, and he acknowledges that the powers conferred on authorities in the Bill are draconian.

Mr. Keetch: I think that my noble Friend said that although he considered the powers draconian, he thought the cause worthy of such powers. I would not want the hon. Gentleman to misrepresent my noble Friend by suggesting that he was critical of the powers.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I do not see in the noble Lord's remarks precisely where he said that he accepted the need for these draconian powers. He said:

> I understand that it is the priority of all the members of Euratom to ratify as soon as possible. This requires all members to ensure that they have amended their domestic legislation appropriately.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 607, c. 782.]

I do not want to suggest that the noble Lord was not conscious that the powers were draconian. In so far as there was no Division in the other place, one might be entitled to assume that he accepted the need for them and did not think that they were so draconian that they warranted his voting against Second Reading.

It is important that we understand that we are being asked to vote for the Bill tonight because of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. I understand that the Bill is a means by which non-nuclear weapons states can be policed to ensure that they are not using civil nuclear programmes clandestinely to develop nuclear weapons and that they are not receiving support from nuclear weapons states.

That prompts the question of why, of the signatories to the non-proliferation treaty—which also include the United States, France, Russia and China—we should be required to expose our domestic civil nuclear programme to the arrangements that are being introduced principally to deal with rogue states such as Iraq and North Korea, which have been mentioned. Today we are faced with the historic prospect of a meeting between North and South Korea, and it may be that even North Korea will come into line. The Bill provides draconian powers of access to private sector companies and their civil nuclear programmes to deal with rogue states, and it is a substantial hammer to crack that particular nut.

Clauses 2 and 5 are the key parts of the Bill. Clause 2 provides the initial powers and details of the information that may be required from private sector companies. Extensive powers—

Mr. Thomas McAvoy (Glasgow, Rutherglen) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question put, That the Question be now put:—

The House divided: Ayes 219, Noes 13.

Division No. 156] **[9.30 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Borrow, David
Breed, Colin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*

Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan (Nottingham S)
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Gill, Christopher
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maples, John
Paterson, Owen
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Edward Leigh and
Mr. Michael Fabricant.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put accordingly, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Speaker: Would the Serjeant at Arms investigate the delay in the No Lobby? An inordinate amount of time is being taken there; hon. Members should be through by now.

The House having divided: Ayes 215, Noes 7.

Division No. 157] **[9.44 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Breed, Colin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John

Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Öpik, Lembit
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Gill, Christopher
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Paterson, Owen
Wilshire, David

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Edward Leigh and
Mr. Michael Fabricant.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Mr. Maclean: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. As you will know, the Order Paper states that the debate on the Nuclear Safeguards Bill

may continue until 10.00 p.m.

Have you ever known an occasion on which the Government have closured their own Bill at 9.30 pm, just as the winding-up speeches were about to start, when the debate could have continued until 10 pm?

Mr. Forth: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. You must be aware, because you were in the Chair at the time, that the closure was inexplicably moved before the Minister had had an opportunity to reply to the debate. The Minister was courteous and assiduous enough to be present throughout the debate, taking notes and participating. I had the impression that he wanted very much to reply. How could the closure motion be moved by the Minister's own side before he had had any chance to reply to the debate?

Madam Speaker: I noticed that a number of Opposition Members spoke for a considerable time. I have always believed that the Opposition must have their say and they certainly did so, according to the list today.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Television Licences (Disclosure of Information) Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Speaker: May I remind the Tellers that it is their duty to report the Division results as soon as possible? That means without delay.

Serjeant at Arms, will you go to the No Lobby to see that the passages are unimpeded and that Members are coming through without any delay?

The House having divided: Ayes 211, Noes 8.

Division No. 158] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Borrow, David
Breed, Colin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*

Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Fabricant, Michael
Gill, Christopher
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Wilshire and
Mr. Eric Forth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Television Licences (Disclosure of Information) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

10.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): I beg, at last, to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I trust that we shall not witness on this Bill any of the filibustering, delaying, obfuscatory nonsense that we had on the previous Bill.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Would the occupant of the Chair have allowed filibustering speeches, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested? Is it not an insult to the occupant of the Chair to suggest that filibustering speeches were going on?

Madam Speaker: I doubt whether the Chair would have allowed filibustering, although the Chair did allow very long speeches in the previous debate.

Mr. Smith: I know an overlong speech when I see one, Madam Speaker. I warn Conservative Members that if they hold up this fair and sensible measure, they will have a lot to answer for to their constituents over the next few months.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Is the right hon. Gentleman suggesting that we should not even consider or debate the issue?

Mr. Smith: I am not suggesting any such thing. I am suggesting that the Bill should be sensibly debated, rather than discussed in the silly fashion that was characteristic of some of the speeches in the previous debate.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his pre-Budget statement of November 1999 that from this autumn everyone aged 75 or over would receive his or her television licence free of charge. As I announced on 21 February, the concession will come into force on 1 November this year.

The Government are introducing free television licences for people over 75 in recognition of the special role that television plays in the lives of many older pensioners. With advancing age, people are much more likely to be housebound or socially isolated. For many in that age group, television becomes the main source of information and entertainment—people's window on the world.

Older pensioners are also more likely to be on low incomes. Nearly 50 per cent. of the households that will benefit from the concession are in the bottom three income bands. By providing free television licences for people aged 75 or over, we shall free well over 3 million households, including some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community, from a sizeable household bill.

Having decided to introduce this concession, our concern is to ensure that it is implemented as efficiently as possible, and with the least possible inconvenience to the people it is designed to help. Thus the Wireless Telegraphy (Television Licence Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2000, which came into force on 1 April, include provisions enabling a person who will have attained the age of 75 years before 1 November this year and who needs to renew their licence before that date, to obtain a short-term licence, so that they pay only for the period up to the start of the concession. From 1 November onwards, anyone who will turn 75 less than 12 months after their television licence is due for renewal will likewise be able to purchase a short-term licence. People whose licence extends beyond 1 November, or subsequently beyond their 75th birthday, will be entitled to a refund of full unexpired months after that date.

We have given careful thought to the procedures for claiming the free television licence. The estimated cost of free licences will be £344 million in 2000-01, with an additional £24.3 million in administrative costs. These costs will be borne from public funds. The Government therefore have a duty to the taxpayer both to ensure that free licences are issued only to those who are entitled to them and that they are issued in the most cost-effective manner.

It is important that we remind ourselves of the intention of the concession, which is to assist the over-75s with access to television services. We are therefore providing free television licences for people aged 75 or over for their principal residence. It is not the intention that a person aged over 75 should be able to obtain multiple free licences to cover the addresses of younger friends and relatives—although I note that at least one national newspaper has already suggested that they may wish to do so. Nor is it the intention that a couple both of whom are aged 75 or over should be able to obtain a second free licence for a second address. We have no reason to believe that significant numbers of people over 75, or their families, will try to take advantage of the system in these ways

Mr. Fabricant: I welcome in broad principle what the right hon. Gentleman is doing, but what about a 75-year-old or a couple aged 75 or over who are living with a much younger family? Will the whole family enjoy a free licence?

Mr. Smith: Yes, the whole family will because that is a household with someone aged over 75 in it.

The administration of the scheme must incorporate sensible precautions to limit the concession to those for whom it is intended and to safeguard public funds. On the other hand, we do not wish to impose unnecessary burdens on genuine claimants. Given those requirements and after careful consideration, we have concluded that much the most efficient way to operate this concession is for the Department of Social Security and, in Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development to make available to the BBC as licensing authorities, certain limited information about people who are, or will shortly become, eligible for the concession. Given that, in practice, the work of administering the television licensing system is performed by a number of sub-contractors acting as agents for the BBC, it is also necessary for that information to be made available to third parties who are providing such services to the BBC under contract or by some other arrangement. That information will be used to set up a database, against which applications for free licences, short-term licences

[Mr. Smith]

and claims for refunds on unexpired licences can be checked. That will enable the BBC to check the information supplied by applicants against that held by the Department of Social Security or the Department for Social Development, to help to verify entitlement.

The Bill is required to authorise the disclosure of such information. Clause 1 will give the Secretary of State—in practice the Department of Social Security—and, in Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development, the legal authority that they currently lack to supply information of prescribed kinds to the BBC.

We intend to use the order-making power in the Bill to prescribe only a narrow range of information which can be supplied to the BBC—namely the age, date of birth, address and national insurance number of persons aged 74 or over. Supplying information on persons aged 74 will ensure that the information is already available to the BBC at the time a person attains the age of eligibility. It is intended that an order under the Bill should also enable the DSS and the Department for Social Development to disclose to the BBC the fact that such a person has died.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): As that is a vital point and people may be concerned that too much information may be handed over to a commercial company outside the Department, will the Secretary of State consider putting on the face of the Bill the undertaking that only the age, date of birth, address and national insurance number will be supplied? That might reassure people as to the contents of the regulations that will be made in due course.

Mr. Smith: The answer to that question is no, although I will of course consider the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. I do not believe that it is necessary, given the clear assurances that I have given about the manner in which we intend to proceed. Moreover, the limited purposes for which the information is being transferred are specifically inscribed in the Bill, which answers the legitimate concerns that people may have about the transfer of information.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On the subject of disclosure of information and the claims of personal privacy, what does the Secretary of State have to say to my constituent Mr. David Bradnack of 47 Thame road, Haddenham, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, who has lived in the same house for 32 years and who does not possess a television licence and does not want one, but who categorically refuses to sign a form saying that he does not possess such a licence or offering reasons why? Is it right and proper that he should so far this year have been troubled by the licensing authority on no fewer than six occasions to provide information that he has already made clear he does not intend to divulge?

Mr. Smith: That case has no relevance to the Bill. However, I am familiar with the case because the hon. Gentleman has mentioned it to me before. All his constituent needs to do is to state clearly to the licensing authorities that he does not possess a television, and that should be the end of the matter.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Worrying though the matter raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) may be, does my right hon. Friend agree that, if the person involved had a halfway useful Member of Parliament, the problem could have been cleared up a long time ago?

Mr. Smith: I am afraid that, although the House can legislate for some things, geography is a bit more difficult.

The Government well understand that some hon. Members who support the proposals for free television licences for people over 75 will be concerned about the privacy and data protection implications of the disclosure to an outside body of information of this kind, which is held by Government Departments for social security and benefits purposes. However, hon. Members should be clear about the implications of requiring the BBC to operate the concession without the information that we propose.

Every elderly claimant would have to produce, in addition to a completed application form, documentary proof of age. We understand that a substantial proportion of claimants would have difficulty doing so. Many would therefore be put to the inconvenience—and in some cases the expense—of obtaining the necessary documentation. Those entitled to a free licence would also have to reapply each year, as the BBC would have no other means of ensuring that they were still alive and living at the address for which the free licence had been issued.

Without confirmatory information provided by the DSS or the Northern Ireland Department for Social Development to guard against fraud, it would be necessary to adopt a significantly more burdensome approach to policing the concession. In our view, such arrangements would be likely to involve a level of intrusion that would outweigh any loss of privacy from the disclosure of strictly limited social security information under the provisions of the Bill.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): All that sounds very complicated. Would it not be easier just to give pensioners a decent pension?

Mr. Smith: I take it that the hon. Gentleman opposes the Bill. It is not complicated. It is a very simple procedure to enable many millions of people to benefit from the measure that we are proposing.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): The Bill is eminently sensible. Will not the concession also enable the BBC to recoup the licence fees that it is not collecting? Will not a well-policed system mean that pensioners will be satisfied with the concession, and that the BBC will be satisfied with its rightful income?

Mr. Smith: The BBC will indeed collect the licence fees due to it for the more than 3 million households that the concession affects. That is welcome.

Administering the concession without the information that this Bill will allow to be made available would, in addition to being more open to fraud, also be far more cumbersome and expensive. Moreover, it would almost certainly delay the implementation of the concession.

The alternative proposition of requiring claims to be vetted by the Department of Social Security and the Department for Social Development after submission to the BBC would still require primary legislation, since the

exchange of information necessary and the verification process itself would entail the disclosure of information. Moreover, such an approach would involve considerable duplication of effort and cost by the BBC and by Government Departments.

We fully accept the need to ensure that information of this kind is used only for the purposes for which it has been provided. Clause 2 therefore places strict limits on the purposes for which the BBC and its contractors are able to make use of the social security information. Information provided under these powers may be used only in connection with television licences for which no fee is payable, or reduced-fee licences.

The policy is to ensure that social security information is used only to facilitate the issue of free television licences, including the associated short-term licences, although the Bill contains provision allowing some flexibility should further concessionary schemes be introduced. However, the Bill does not allow the BBC to use information for the purposes of administering any new scheme or, indeed, any existing concession unless an order is made designating the scheme.

Clause 3 protects social security information supplied to the BBC by providing that the recipient of such information—the BBC, one of its contractors, or anyone who works or has worked for such a recipient—is guilty of an offence if they disclose that information without lawful authority. The offence extends to companies, including the BBC as a corporation created by royal charter, to past as well as present employees of such companies, and also to staff working under other arrangements, such as self-employed people engaged on a consultancy basis.

The penalty for an offence will be, on summary conviction, imprisonment of up to six months, or a fine of up to £5,000, or both, and, on indictment, imprisonment for up to two years and an unlimited fine, or both.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): The Secretary of State correctly states that under clause 3 a new offence is created which could result in someone being sent to prison for up to two years. Why is it deemed necessary to create such a very heavy penalty? People who heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer's welcome announcement did not realise that it would result in the creation of a new criminal offence, with such a heavy penalty.

Mr. Smith: The reason is very simple. We have to protect the privacy and strict confidentiality of data which are being made available for specific purposes. That is clear from the content of the Bill.

The approach that we propose, and that the Bill will make possible, has a number of advantages. It will enable the application procedure for a free television licence to be greatly simplified, to the benefit of beneficiaries and—by reducing both the possibility of fraud and the cost of administering the scheme—the taxpayer. Claimants will have only to complete and return a simple form that will be sent out to all households over the coming months. In the majority of cases, there will be no need for any further action on their part. Additional information will need to be sought only if there is a discrepancy between the information provided in the claim form and that held by the BBC as a result of the Bill.

I therefore encourage and request the House to give the Bill a Second Reading.

10.32 pm

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): May I begin by saying how much we regret that this important and, in many ways, welcome measure has been introduced following another Second Reading debate? It is not helpful to the House's consideration of the matter that it takes place at such a late hour.

The Government will no doubt be interested to know whether the Opposition support the granting of free television licences to those over 75. In anticipation of that question, let me say at the outset that of course we give an enthusiastic welcome to any sensible measure that alleviates the burden of the licence fee on the elderly. We have advocated and welcomed measures to halve the fee for registered blind people and to increase subtitling for those who suffer from deafness.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): If the hon. Gentleman has such wholehearted support for this measure, why, in the 18 years that his party was in office, did it fail to introduce any similar measure?

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman asks a rather silly and irrelevant question.

The decision to provide all 75-year-olds with a free television licence will no doubt be very welcome to the beneficiaries, particularly in the light of the paltry 75p a week increase in the basic state pension announced in the Budget. It is, however, a complex scheme to operate, and may be confusing to some people. Indeed, it may be confusing even to the Secretary of State, whose Department, we understand, was not properly consulted prior to the Chancellor's announcement of the scheme. The Secretary of State may be further confused, because he will, in practice, have no say in the operation of the Bill that he has introduced. The right hon. Gentleman is not mentioned in the Bill—it refers to the Secretary of State for Social Services and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Mr. Chris Smith: May I point out, for the record, that there is no such person as the Secretary of State for Social Services?

Mr. Ainsworth: I meant the Secretary of State for Social Security. The right hon. Gentleman is obviously fairly desperate if he has to make points like that.

The people who matter are the beneficiaries, the 75-year-olds. The measure will require them to opt into the scheme; it will not happen automatically. Those pensioners will still have to apply for a television licence and hold one, even though—provided they have filled in the right form—they will not have to pay for it. I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement tonight that multiple applications will not be allowed.

We need to hear what steps the Government are taking to ensure a proper understanding of the measure among those whom it is intended to benefit. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that eligible pensioners do not confuse free licences with no licences?

Will the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting confirm when she winds up that pensioners over 75 found with a television set and no free licence will still be liable

[Mr. Ainsworth]

to criminal charges? Will she confirm that elderly pensioners may be liable to pay a fine for failing to hold a free television licence?

Mr. Bermingham: Does the hon. Gentleman actually think that we live in a society where we would prosecute an 80-year-old because they were not able to obtain a free licence? How ridiculous can he be?

Mr. Ainsworth: It may be ridiculous, but my understanding is that that is the law. The hon. Gentleman should address his remarks to his Front-Bench colleagues.

There is also the question of households which include a 75-year-old but which do not possess a television set. Although relatively few in number, they do exist. The free television licence is effectively a £104 a year additional benefit for owning a television; a benefit conferred on anyone who lives in an eligible household, whatever their means or age. Are there any plans to provide an equivalent benefit to those households which have chosen not to own a television set? They may feel that they are more than £100 a year worse off than their neighbours as a result of the scheme.

The scheme is innovative and breaks new ground in a number of ways. Welcome though its objectives are, it is inescapable that it adds further complexity to the tax and benefits system, which many people believe is confusing enough already. It casts the BBC—whose prime function is to make and broadcast radio, television and online services—in the role of welfare agent. Admittedly, the BBC is already responsible for the existing concession arrangements which, by general consent, are unsatisfactory and arbitrary.

Mr. Kaufman: Does the hon. Gentleman understand that the BBC has this power because the party of which he is a member gave the BBC the power to collect the licence, which it did not have before his party provided it? That is the reason—but then he has no memory and no knowledge of any of these matters.

Mr. Ainsworth: I was not in the House when the power was conferred, but there is no doubt that the present concessionary scheme has not worked as everyone would have wished. It is full of anomalies and is in need of reform. The Secretary of State himself has said so, although I have not noticed any specific measures coming from the Secretary of State or the Government to tackle the problem of the 130,000 people—pensioners and mentally and physically disabled people—who will remain on the existing scheme and will not benefit from the Bill.

Mr. Chris Smith: For the record, may I remind the hon. Gentleman—he must momentarily have forgotten it—that we extended the existing concessionary scheme to ensure that men aged between 60 and 65 who are in sheltered housing qualify for it, when, previously, they had not?

Mr. Ainsworth: I am indeed aware of that fact, but the Secretary of State has not addressed the problem that arises when someone under 60 arrives in a qualifying home where he or she may inadvertently disqualify existing residents.

The new arrangements will do nothing for people aged under 75 who are on low incomes. Indeed, the Secretary of State may have heard, as we have done, from people for whom his scheme causes unhappiness. For example, a 55-year-old man on income support has wondered angrily why he is not included while the Duke of Devonshire is.

Mr. Leigh: Is not the point that the Government have realised, following the resignation of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) and the derisory 75p increase, that enthusiasm among pensioners is draining away? All their proposals are mere gimmicks. They are attacking the contributory principle and trying to drain self-reliance from our pensioners, who will not be fooled by gimmicks such as this.

Mr. Ainsworth: I agree that the Government have displeased many pensioners, but my hon. Friend will have heard me say that I welcome any sensible measure that will improve the lot of pensioners, as the free television licence arguably will.

If television ownership is henceforth to be treated as a right or a benefit, the Government must address why people are not entitled to it on age grounds, as well as why they are. If television is to be treated as a right and the BBC as part of the tax and benefits system, it is only fair to ask what the implications are for television and the BBC. The Bill implies that the Government—or the taxpayer—will take a direct financial stake in the BBC from November. In our enthusiasm to provide free licences to those aged over 75, it would be wrong to overlook the significance of the fact that the state—or, depending on how one defines these things, the taxpayer—will take a stake of nearly 15 per cent. in the BBC. That is a major departure in principle, even if the stake is, for the moment, a minority one.

Were the benefit of the free licence to be extended to all households that contain a 65-year-old, the state—or the taxpayer—would take a direct financial interest in more than a third of the BBC's funding. As the possibility of further extending the benefit in that way, or in others, has been the subject of speculation, and because the order-making power in clause 5 implies that the scheme may be extended, the Secretary of State should tell us whether plans exist to extend it. Do the Government contemplate that? If that question is too direct, will the Secretary of State or the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting tell us whether they welcome extension in principle?

The Bill has significant implications for the BBC and its independent funding arrangements.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I am fairly sure that the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the World Service is funded directly through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Does he think that the World Service's integrity is in any way put at risk by that? Is tonight's proposal any different?

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Lady makes a reasonable point, but the World Service has existed for a long time and has acquired its own culture—nor does it deal with the domestic market, as she well knows.

For entirely laudable reasons—the desire to help 75-year-olds—the Government propose to unsettle the BBC's unique funding mechanism, which has been in

place for 70 years. No doubt the Secretary of State will protest, like the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), that no implications arise for the BBC's impartiality from the fact that the Treasury will take a significant interest in the corporation. Some would say that that view is naive; others would argue that the Government enjoy exercising control and like to put their mouth where their money is.

What assurance can the Secretary of State give that the stake taken in the BBC will not lead to interference in the way in which programmes are made or in editorial independence?

Mr. Bermingham: I have lost the hon. Gentleman's logic. If, for example, I went to Sainsburys in Camden and bought some groceries, I would have invested in Sainsburys, but that would not give me a say in the company. The Government are making good a revenue loss; that is not an investment—it is the return of a revenue loss and does not give the Government a say in the BBC.

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman is wide of the mark. I do not know the hon. Gentleman's age and will not speculate on it, but, under his scenario, in order to help him and to absolve him from paying Sainsburys, the Government would be paying Sainsburys direct; they would be taking a direct stake in the company's future.

Mr. Fabricant: As I am sure that my hon. Friend was not around when the BBC received its royal charter in 1926, I remind him that the corporation argued—the argument is just as applicable at present—that, because it was funded through the licence fee rather than from direct income from the taxpayer, it would remain independent of the Government, who would not be able to alter the amount of money paid every year. The BBC would not be subject to blackmail, as it might be if the amount were increased beyond its current 15 per cent.

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend makes a compelling point.

Some people see the Bill as a bridgehead for a funding system for the BBC of which they disapprove. Colleagues on both sides of the House do not like the licence fee; they may see the Bill as the first practical blow against a funding mechanism that they consider to be unjust and inappropriate in a multi-channel age.

I do not think that the Secretary of State wants the end of the licence fee, although the best way to undermine confidence in it is to go on increasing it—as he has recently done. I do not think that he wants to undermine the licence fee, although giving the taxpayer a direct stake of £340 million a year in funding it might not be construed as helpful in the long run. Those who claim that the Bill, by allowing the Treasury into the BBC's funding, underlines the Government's commitment to the licence fee as an independent funding mechanism, do not understand either the nature of the licence fee or the notion of independence.

I want to ensure that the Secretary of State is aware—acting, as he is, from the best possible motives—of the law of unexpected consequences. That law has been much in evidence recently, in Scotland, Wales, London and the other place. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman knows what he is doing by rearranging the settlement that established and has maintained the BBC. We hope to return to those issues later in the Bill's proceedings.

The Bill will involve the disclosure to the BBC, or to unspecified persons or companies providing services to the BBC, of potentially sensitive information about individuals that is held by the Department of Social Security, or, in Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development. Such information falls under the Data Protection Acts 1984 and 1988.

The Bill's prime function is to give legality to the plan to allow the BBC access to social security information held on individuals. Although such information is not defined in the measure, the explanatory notes state that it

> is intended to encompass a range of benefits including retirement pensions, income support, severe disablement allowance and attendance allowance.

The relevance of such information in determining whether a person aged 74 or over is eligible to benefit from the measure is not made clear. I note that the precise information that may be supplied to the BBC will be defined in an order to be published by the Secretary of State for Social Security. I was pleased that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport reassured us on that point. None the less, it is a pity that the Bill does not include a clear definition.

It is important to note that, until now, information on the national insurance database has been made available only to national and local government bodies concerned with administering benefits, crime prevention and justice. Although the BBC owes its existence to a royal charter, it is not a public body in the sense that Customs and Excise and local authorities are public bodies. The Bill therefore creates a precedent in the way that it amends the Data Protection Acts.

Concern has been expressed in particular about the way in which previously protected information may in future be made available not only to the BBC, but to

> any person providing the BBC with services in connection with television licences.

That is a wide definition, and clearly includes the possibility of commercial companies being given access to sensitive information. It is regrettable that the identity of those companies is not specified in the Bill.

The explanatory notes state that

> much of the administration of the television licensing system is carried out on behalf of the BBC by contractors.

Just over a year ago, the contract for the administration and enforcement of the licence fee was awarded to a new company, Envision, whose shareholders are the Post Office subsidiary SSL, the WPP Group and Bull Information Systems Ltd. I should be grateful if the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting could, in her winding-up speech, let the House know whether any other contractors may be in receipt of social security information about elderly pensioners as a result of the Bill. It is worth noting that the social security information that will be given to the BBC includes information about all 74-year-olds, whether or not they own a television. That has caused concern to civil rights groups.

Clause 3 sets out several offences designed to safeguard the security of the information that may be disclosed to the BBC and its contractors. Those safeguards are important, and it is essential that they are watertight.

[Mr. Ainsworth]

National insurance information and the name, address and age of individuals could, in the wrong hands, be open to abuse. In particular, such information could give rise to benefit fraud or other types of fraud. It could also be used to make commercial gain at the expense of elderly and vulnerable people. We shall want closely to examine those issues at a later stage.

While welcoming the scheme, it would be wrong not to give consideration to its cost. It is a matter of disquiet that nobody has yet produced a definitive number of households that will be eligible to benefit from the scheme. The Secretary of State said tonight that the figure was significantly more than 3 million; we previously heard from the Government that it was upwards of 3 million, and earlier than that it was around 3 million, so it has not been settled.

As a result, there has been considerable variation in the estimated cost of providing free licences to those aged over 75. The Gavyn Davies panel established by the Secretary of State put the cost at £283 million; more recently, the Government put the cost at £300 million. I understand that the BBC recently estimated the cost to be between £320 million and £330 million, and tonight we heard that the figure is £340 million. I wonder what it will be next week.

It would be helpful if the Secretary of State could tell the House how many households he believes will benefit and what the cost will be once the scheme is up and running. In addition, I understand that there will be considerable start-up costs. They are estimated at about £20 million and the annual running costs are estimated to be in the region of £10 million. I should be grateful for confirmation of those figures. It is of course a great relief to the BBC that those costs will be borne by the Government and not by the corporation, which already spends £133 million a year collecting the licence fee.

I have outlined some of the complex issues to which the Bill gives rise. No doubt we will want closely to scrutinise the measures in the Bill's later stages. The Bill does not provide the opportunity to discuss the wider issues of BBC funding, but I want to place on the record Conservative Members' view that the BBC's priorities should be first to define its remit, and secondly to look to reduce the licence fee for everyone. That is the best way to achieve a fair, simple and sustainable method of funding public service broadcasting.

10.54 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I listened to the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) with growing incredulity. He put to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State a question that can be answered only when the Bill is passed. We can only estimate the number of beneficiaries from the measure because the information that the Bill makes available is not yet available. When it is available, my right hon. Friend will be able to assess accurately and with total precision the number of beneficiaries.

The sheer ignorance shown by the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues about the origins of the licence and the way in which it is collected and used is extraordinary.

Mr. Ainsworth: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I will in a moment. Let me make that point clear. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) spoke quite inaccurately about the origins of the licence and its purpose. The licence was introduced not to fund the BBC, but as a tax on the ownership of a wireless set. It was introduced by a Conservative Government. It was equivalent to the tax on the ownership of a dog, which then existed. The money went to the BBC because the BBC was the only broadcasting organisation.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: No. In the same way, the hon. Member—

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned my name and said that I had got something historically wrong. He has misled the House—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman must not rise on a point of order and then make a point that is simply a matter for debate.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not even complain about the hon. Gentleman's use of unparliamentary language when he said that I had misled the House. You did not hear that. If you had heard it, you would have asked him to withdraw it. As the hon. Gentleman is making such a total fool of himself—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps we should proceed in a slightly calmer way.

Mr. Ainsworth: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: There are several points that I wish to make, then I shall certainly give way to the hon. Member for East Surrey.

In a speech full of cheap points, the hon. Gentleman attacked the Government for what he called a paltry increase of 75p a week in the pension. I happen to believe that that increase is too small, and I have encouraged my right hon. Friends to increase it, but the only reason that it is 75p is that the hon. Gentleman's party in office cut the link between earnings and pensions, and linked pensions to inflation. The 75p increase is the result of that link. Whereas Labour Members of Parliament certainly have a right to say that they wish that the increase were higher, Conservatives have not. The formula was introduced by the Conservatives.

Mr. Ainsworth: I am grateful. I hesitate to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman in one of his more vituperative and dyspeptic moods. May I take him back to his opening remarks? He said that the Secretary of State had not been able to produce the definitive number of households

because the information did not exist. If the information does not exist on the national insurance database, what is the point of providing the information to the BBC? The BBC does not have access to the information, but that is not to say that it does not exist.

Mr. Kaufman: My right hon. Friend wasted his breath by correcting the hon. Gentleman when he misnamed the Department of Social Security as the Department of Social Services. Since on their showing today the Conservatives will never hold any of those offices, regardless of what they are called, I do not know why my right hon. Friend bothered.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way to me?

Mr. Kaufman: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman because he is behaving immoderately. When he can contain himself, and when his expression changes from the deep red on his face now—

Mr. Fabricant: It is a suntan.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind the House that the Bill concerns simply the transfer of information from the DSS to the BBC? Perhaps we can now get back calmly to the content of the Bill.

Mr. Kaufman: I shall do so happily. It had been my only end to deal with that matter—before the Opposition began to make such utter idiots of themselves throughout today's proceedings, something that we shall certainly be communicating to the electorate in, for example, the Lichfield constituency.

Mr. Fabricant: Right: will the right hon. Gentleman now give way?

Mr. Kaufman: Yes, I will now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Fabricant: I have made it absolutely clear that I welcome the provision. As the right hon. Gentleman probably does not have any understanding of history and would not want deliberately to mislead the House, may I inform him that I was correct? The licence was introduced as a fee when the BBC received its royal charter in 1926, as I said. He is wrong; the radio tax was introduced in 1923, when the BBC was the British Broadcasting Company. We are talking about the British Broadcasting Corporation. Will he now apologise?

Mr. Kaufman: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman feels better for having got that off his chest. Of course, the BBC was founded not in 1923 but in 1922. So, we are all square on that. He can now calm down and recover his breath, and we can go on to discuss the contents of the Bill, as I had always intended to do.

I feel particular pride and pleasure in the Bill because, as shadow Home Secretary, I made free licences for pensioners Labour party policy. The Bill is a partial fulfilment of that. It is a matter of great satisfaction to many thousands of my constituents, as it will be to millions of people all over the country, that the Government have introduced this excellent measure.

The hon. Member for East Surrey, among many other things when the election comes, will have to explain why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) said, the Conservatives in 18 years never introduced something that they now say is a good thing and will not oppose. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) would say that he introduced a Bill on the subject during that time. That is absolutely true; he has a record on the issue that is nearly as good as mine.

I am delighted that the Government have introduced the Bill not for the reasons that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State stated but for those to which the hon. Member for East Surrey alluded. I approve of the measure very strongly indeed, and so will very many of my constituents, but not only because it will introduce free licences for people aged 75 and older. Its provisions make it possible to introduce free licences for a great many others. I very much hope that, as the years proceed, with this Government in power, as they will be, they will use the order-making power to widen the scope of the concession.

I am delighted that more than 3 million people now qualify for free television licences, and so are my constituents. That is excellent, but since the information will be available, there is scope for the provision to be widened, and for all pensioners to receive a free licence. I have sufficient confidence in the way in which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor runs the economy to believe that it will not be too long before the Government can introduce free licences for 60-year-old women and 65-year-old men.

The hon. Member for East Surrey—this bit of the Bill he had read and understands—made the point that the Bill refers to disclosure of information about people on income support. I very much hope that the finances of this country, under the enlightened policies of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, will eventually lead us to providing free licences for those on other benefits, too.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I am grateful for the plug that my right hon. Friend gave me, but does he agree that it would be wise for us in the coming general election campaign, whenever it is, to warn the electorate that, if the Conservatives were to take office, what we are introducing would certainly be taken away?

Mr. Kaufman: The possibility of a Conservative Government is not a hypothesis; it is fantasy. My hon. Friend knows that I respect him, but I do not want to speculate on that, because the notion of Conservative Members forming a Government after their antics today is so absurd that it is not worth contemplating for more than a moment.

Mr. Winnick: We should warn the electors all the same.

Mr. Kaufman: Yes, I do not mind issuing a big warning. I shall go to Lichfield among other places to do that.

Mr. Winnick: Is the majority 277?

Mr. Kaufman: No, 238.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman knows that he is straying into territory where he should not be.

Mr. Kaufman: I shall now stray back to the theme of my argument before my hon. Friend intervened. As the hon. Member for East Surrey accurately pointed out, the Bill makes it possible to provide free licences for millions of people on social benefits. That is excellent. I told the Chancellor on the night that he announced his comprehensive spending review that I supported his comments about licences because it was an excellent move. However, it is also the thin end of the wedge.

I do not share the fears of the hon. Member for East Surrey that the independence of the BBC will be eroded. The BBC is capable of being hostile to us all without any particular incentive. I do not believe that the Bill will affect its independence, which would not be compromised if many more millions of people got free licences, or if the licence were ultimately abolished. The Bill does not provide for that, it provides for giving information that will lead to free licences for those aged 75 and over. It also creates the basis for many more people to have free licences.

As the country's prosperity increases under this Government and the policies of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, many more people will be able to have free television licences. I am delighted that the basis for that has been created today in the Bill. Although I support the Government with joy in every Division, I shall go into the Lobby with particular pleasure if the Tories, through folly, force a Division even on closure.

Mr. Winnick: I hope that they do.

Mr. Kaufman: I, too, hope that they do, because I would like the names of the people who tried to block the measure to be recorded in black and white. However, I do not believe that they will dare.

11.7 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I do not intend to delay the House for long because the measure is sensible and uncontroversial. It is a matter for other hon. Members if they wish to detain the House; that will become apparent in due course.

The Bill will enact a measure that is welcome to all parties. It will provide free television licences for those aged 75 and over. The Secretary of State has shown that the method is sensible and I am convinced that it is the best way in which to achieve the Government's objective.

It is a pity that pensioners aged between 65 and 75 will not receive free television licences. I hope that the Government aspire to move towards that when the economy allows. I believe that the economy already allows for it, given the amount of money that the Chancellor has stashed away. Perhaps the Secretary of State will put in a claim for some of it to help pensioners aged between 65 and 75 who feel excluded from the measure. By saying that, I do not detract from the measure, which is welcome for those aged 75 and over.

Some hon. Members have mentioned pension levels. Although they are not the subject of tonight's debate, I hope that I can respond to one point. Some hon. Members claimed that although the measure is welcome, it is no substitute for a decent state pension. I wish to put on record that I share that sentiment. However, earlier this year, hon. Members, including Conservative Members who made that point, had the opportunity to support a Liberal Democrat motion stating that the increase of 75p in the pension was inadequate. However, not one Conservative Member supported that motion in the Lobby. Perhaps those with that sentiment might consider how to vote when similar motions come before the House.

The Bill's principle is correct as is the method, which is to make it as easy as possible for a person over 75 to obtain a free television licence. The Secretary of State is right to say that the alternative method—production of documents—would be bureaucratic and expensive. Bringing such documents together might be a worry for some people of that age, so it must be sensible and right to use the easiest method possible.

What are the possible drawbacks? I do not agree about the alleged implications for the BBC's independence as I do not believe that there are any. Government pressure—not pressure from this Government—is generally put on the BBC during the licence fee negotiations. That is the key point at which Government pressure may be applied and I have seen no evidence of it. This arrangement will make no difference whatever to the BBC's income. If anything, it will enhance it by guaranteeing that pensioners over 75 will have a TV licence and that the money will be refunded by the Government. There are no such implications: as the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) said, the BBC World Service has been funded directly by the Government for many years and I have seen no evidence that it has been unduly sympathetic to the Government of the day. The BBC's independence is well established and has been continuous. We should all be proud of that, and the drawback does not exist.

The civil liberties implications, which were referred to by the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) from the Conservative Front Bench, could be a drawback. I recognise that the Bill will infringe civil liberties to some extent, but as a member of Liberty and someone who is committed to civil liberties, I have no worries. As the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) said—I beg his pardon if it was not him—it might help if the extent of the information to be used were codified.

Mr. Bermingham: I am at a loss to understand the hon. Gentleman's point. How can asking a person's name, address, date of birth and national insurance number infringe civil liberties? For example, when the hon. Gentleman applies to a loan company or to anyone else, they ask for those details. Although they may not ask for his national insurance number, they may ask about his employment and employer. There is no infringement there; what is the infringement here?

Mr. Baker: The hon. Gentleman fails to recognise that I speak in support of the Government; I am not attacking them. I should not have given way to him and I always regret it. I shall try not to do so in future.

There could be a civil liberties implication, but, as I said, I do not regard it to be of such magnitude as to warrant any attempt to hold up the Bill. However, it is important to quantify the extent to which information will be used to ensure that there is no extension without parliamentary authority and accountability. The Secretary

of State nods; there is no disagreement over that. If we are to discuss civil liberties implications for the country, we might consider closed circuit television, the use of DNA testing or the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill. Those could impinge far more than the Bill, whose impingement is minuscule.

On cost, the Secretary of State gave a figure of £344 million and £24.3 million for administration. If the £24.3 million is to be refunded automatically to the BBC by TV Licensing, I am keen to ensure that there is an incentive to minimise the administration charge. If it is to be repaid by the Government, whatever it is, what is the incentive to minimise? I hope that they have a mechanism to ensure that the charge is realistic, not a method of raising funds by the back door. Will the Minister address that point?

Will the Minister also deal with the point about the 75-year-old who buys a licence at full cost, despite any campaign that the Government may launch, putting information through every letterbox? Some people may do that for one or two years until they realise that they qualify for a free licence. That may be unlikely, but it could occur. Will such people be able to reclaim the money for the licence that they did not legally need to buy? Will they be able to say that they made a mistake and have bought a licence for two years, and ask for their £208 back? Will that be possible under the arrangements in the Bill?

I have read the Bill carefully, and it refers to restrictions on a person using information that has accrued. The Secretary of State alluded to that obliquely, but can the Minister confirm that the BBC is covered by those restrictions, and that it will not be allowed to use for other purposes, such as marketing, the information provided solely for this narrow purpose?

Mr. Chris Smith *indicated assent.*

Mr. Baker: The Minister nods. I was certain that that would be the answer, but I wanted to get it on the record.

The hon. Member for East Surrey was derided by Labour Members when he raised a legalistically important issue. He asked about the legal position of someone who qualifies for a free licence but does not possess a licence. What is the position of such a person?

Those minor questions need to be answered, and I hope that the Secretary of State will agree that they are important in their own right. The Bill is sensible. It enacts important legislation to give pensioners over 75 a free television licence. In the judgment of the Liberal Democrats it does that in a sensible way and with the minimum of bureaucracy. For that reason, my hon. Friends and I will support the Government should any maverick Conservatives call for a vote on the Bill.

11.17 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) in welcoming the Bill. I particularly welcome this measure as it is estimated that it will affect 5,500 of my constituents, who will receive a free television licence on 1 November this year. The Government are beginning to sort out part of the legacy left by the Tories in 1997. I hope that this is the first step in altering the structure of the concessionary licence scheme, which generates many complaints, especially from people in non-qualifying accommodation who have neighbours who qualify. The scheme is unfair and unsatisfactory.

The independent review panel chaired by Gavyn Davies, which reported in July last year, was asked to consider whether an alternative was available. It concluded that

> the current Accommodation for Residential Care concessionary scheme should be retained, despite its obvious drawbacks, since no superior alternative, funded from the licence fee, has been found.

In an annexe to that report entitled "Possible reform of the Accommodation for Residential Care Concessionary Scheme" it stated that a possible reform might consist of four changes.

It has been brought to my attention by borough councillors in my constituency that there has recently been a review in the Rotherham borough by the television licensing authority. More than 200 people have been informed that they no longer qualify for a concessionary television licence. The vast majority of them have qualified for years. The review was prompted by inquiries from other residents. The 200 were informed by letter on 13 March this year that their properties are now deemed by the television licensing authority to fall outside the common and exclusive boundary criteria.

One of the four possible changes suggested by the review panel was

> to remove the restriction that the scheme must be a group of at least four dwellings within a common and exclusive boundary.

If that were implemented, it is likely that none of those 200 would be affected. Of course I recognise that the Government have to respond to the review panel's report comprehensively, and cannot just pick off one or two items. However, the situation is causing great concern to those elderly residents, many of whom exist on means-tested benefits. The ruling implies that they will have to find £100 with which to purchase full licences by 1 May: effectively, they have been given only five weeks' notice. Will the provisions mentioned earlier by the Secretary of State enable my constituents to purchase short-term licences? It is very likely that many of those 200 will be eligible for free licences in the autumn.

I feel that the licensing authority has handled the matter badly. I accept that it is independent of Government, but will my hon. Friend the Minister look into the anomaly as a matter of urgency, and establish whether an internal review could take place inside the authority to—at the very least—stop it from proceeding with the change affecting people who will become eligible for free licences in the autumn? Putting pressure on those people to find money now, when for years they have not had to find more than £5 for their concessionary licences, strikes me as insensitive, to say the least.

I congratulate the Government on the Bill. I hope that it constitutes the first step towards clearing up the mess that we inherited from the Tories—a mess that has caused a great deal of anger and frustration to many of our constituents for far too long.

11.21 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I am glad that the Government have finally introduced the measure that I proposed in a ten-minute Bill on 15 July

[Mr. Howard Flight]

1997. As the House will recollect, the then Minister—the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher)—explained to me that it was not current Government policy to adopt my proposal. I argued then, as a green new Member, that it was those aged 75 and above who depended most on their television sets, and that they were also the poorest members of society. That is an entirely pragmatic argument. I calculated then that the cost would be about £290 million; we have heard what it is today. I stress that I do not think there is the same case for free licences for those aged between 65 and 75, some 70 per cent. of who are relatively well off—often a good deal better off than families bringing up children.

However, I do not understand why the Government have chosen this machinery with which to implement the measure. The arrangement seems to be that people must have a licence, and the Government are to pay. Would it not be much cheaper and simpler if people sent their licence applications along to the Department of Social Security and the Department, which has the records, settled the matter directly with the licensing authority? The Government are going all round the houses by requiring the DSS to give information to the BBC and the BBC to come back with it, whether or not the issue of confidentiality is material. I do not know why such a convoluted route has been chosen to deal with the simple issue of the Government's paying for licences.

Do the Government intend at some stage to extend the free licence to those aged under 75, or to other categories? Other hon. Members have made much play of that possibility. If so, what is the justification in terms of those who are most in need?

Finally—for it is late—what, if any, new ramifications are involved? I believe that there may be requirements for all pensioner benefits to come into operation at a standard age at some time in the future.

11.24 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I, too, welcome the Bill in general, but what a shame that it has not been funded either by greater efficiency in the BBC—which I am sure that the Secretary of State would also have liked—or by alternative means of financing the BBC, such as sponsorship or even advertising on Radio 1 or Radio 2. I am surprised that the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman)—who has now left—did not argue, as he normally does in his Select Committee, for the total privatisation of the BBC, rather than its being another burden on the taxpayer.

I am still concerned about the whole issue of funding by the taxpayer. I cannot help but accuse the Secretary of State of being a man—and, indeed, part of a Government—who breaks principles and then builds on the breaking of the principle. For example, some years ago, the principle of additionality was broken when the national lottery was applied by the Secretary of State to fund health and education, which would normally be paid for by the taxpayer.

The principle was that the BBC's domestic services at least should be funded by the licence payer. Now, about 15 per cent. will be funded by the taxpayer. Although the spokesman for the Opposition said that he did not see any difficulty with that, I do. As I said in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Gorton, John Reith, later Lord Reith, knew in 1926, as people know now, that it would be easy for the Government to say that they would pay less or more in a particular year to the BBC for funding. There would be the threat of blackmail.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: I hope that, just for the record, my hon. Friend will clarify his reference to the spokesman for the Opposition. I think that he was referring to the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank my hon. Friend—I was referring to the minor Opposition, the Liberal Democrats. I certainly did not mean my hon. Friend, who is far too sensible to have made the points made by the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker).

Mr. Bermingham: Can the hon. Gentleman explain the logicality in what he has said? He suggested that, if the BBC became totally privatised, it could rely on sponsorship, advertising and such things. If that is so, who pays the costs? The answer is the purchaser of the goods, the advertising and everything else, which means that, eventually, the costs rise for the elderly and there is no concession.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. That is outside the scope of the Bill. I hope that the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) will not respond.

Mr. Bermingham: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. How can the financing of the matter be outside the scope of the Bill?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is a point of debate. It is not part of this debate, and I have so ruled.

Mr. Bermingham: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not argue with the ruling that I have just made.

Mr. Bermingham: I am going to ask a question on the ruling. Can the occupant of the Chair please explain the following? If we are debating the financing of the BBC, how can a question—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must make it clear that that is not what we are debating. The Bill is concerned with the transfer of information from the Department of Social Security to another body. That is the sole scope of the debate. What the hon. Gentleman is trying to raise is outside the scope.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am concerned about the actual cost of the services. I would have thought that, if they were subcontracted to private firms, a cost saving would result, but it seems, unless I have misunderstood the Secretary of State—I may have done—that there will be an approximate 10 per cent. collection charge. That seems extremely high. I hope that the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting can clarify the matter, particularly as there

will be no collection: once the information is provided by the Department of Social Security and its similar bodies in Scotland and Northern Ireland, there will be no collection charge. Therefore, I cannot see why 10 per cent. is the amount that has been determined by the Government as the cost for maintaining that system.

I share some concern about making the database available to third parties. I accept that it is only dates of birth, names, addresses and national insurance numbers, but that, too, creates a dangerous precedent. I welcome the Bill's provisions on the high penalties that will come into play if people give information out, but we all know that information is leaked. There are high penalties—under Labour or Conservative Governments—when firms have subcontracted to print White Papers and other Government documents, and information from those documents has been leaked. I should like to know specifically what rigorous controls Ministers will apply to ensure that the information provided by the Bill does not leak out.

I should like briefly to deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), who argued that the BBC World Service has been funded directly by Government. If memory serves me right, that funding was established, in 1936, as grant in aid from the Foreign Office. However, as the Opposition spokesman my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) said, the BBC World Service is not a domestic service, but an international service. Arguably, therefore, the Government may not, for political reasons, wish to intervene—at least on a daily basis—in the editorial decisions of the BBC World Service.

In 1926, the founding principle of the British Broadcasting Corporation was that BBC radio news—which is now BBC radio and television news; in addition to new media, such as BBC Online, that are also funded by the licence fee—was concerned on a minute-by-minute basis, let alone a daily basis with domestic political affairs. It could therefore be argued that, in domestic matters, the Government might well have an interest in interfering with BBC editorial control. It was for that reason that the licence fee was designed to be at one remove from daily interference by the Government.

I do not wish to detain the House. However, I should like to say how very much I welcome the Secretary of State's comment when I intervened on him and he said that people over 75 who live with their younger families could bring to their whole household exemption from the licence fee. My mother lives 100 yd from me, in Lichfield. She is 89 and spends some time watching television. Now, I have an incentive perhaps to ask her to move in with me; then again, perhaps not.

With all the slight doubts that I have expressed, I wish the Bill a fair wind.

Mr. Chris Smith: May I assure the hon. Gentleman that it is not one of the legislation's purposes to impose such an awful prospect on his mother?

Mr. Fabricant: I shall not thank the Secretary of State for his intervention. I thought that encouraging older people to live with their families might be part of the Government's social exclusion policy, and that the concession might be quite an incentive in achieving that objective. I am shocked that the Secretary of State, who usually takes such a lateral—even joined-up—view of government, has not discussed that possibility with the social exclusion unit.

Nevertheless, as the hour is getting late, and as the right hon. Member for Gorton is keen to climb into his cot, I shall detain the House no longer.

11.33 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I think that it is important, first, to say that it is outrageous that we are commencing our consideration of the Bill so late at night. The Bill deserved a proper Second Reading, starting at about 3.30 or 4 pm. If Labour Members are complaining that it is rather later in the evening and that we should have started on the Bill earlier, they should realise that the Government should not have scheduled for one day the Second Reading debates of two important pieces of legislation.

I am very concerned at the way in which the Bill goes about trying to secure its purpose. I have no objection whatsoever to free television licences for those who are 75 or over. Unfortunately, the Government do not go far enough—there should be free television licences for everyone. I do not approve at all of the BBC's current funding method, and should like that system to be radically changed.

It was quite interesting listening to the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman)—who I assume has now managed to make the "Dispatches" programme. I do give him my apologies for the fact that he has missed so many important television programmes today on which he could have aired his views on the Bill.

Mr. Thomas McAvoy (Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household): Make a point.

Mr. Maclean: I have some other points, which the Deputy Whip may encourage me to make more quickly or more slowly, depending on his sedentary interventions.

One theme running through the comments of the right hon. Member for Gorton and other Labour Members was how much of an electoral ploy they thought the measure was. It was instructive to hear the right hon. Gentleman threaten to visit Lichfield and explain to my hon. Friend's constituents how generous Labour was and how mean other parties were. Whatever noble causes may have inspired the Secretary of State and the Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Gorton and others consider it purely an electoral tactic. Good luck to them; there is no harm in that. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is as successful in Lichfield as he is everywhere else. That is why the Labour party keeps him off the television all the time.

The Government have gone about this in the wrong way. If they want to ensure that people aged 74 pay progressively less for their television licence and then get a free licence when they are 75, they should not go about it by issuing information on everybody aged 74 and above to a commercial company, which will check that information against television licence applications and decide whether the person is eligible.

The Government should keep all that information to themselves. There should be a little department within the Department of Social Security to which the BBC or its

[Mr. Maclean]

agents apply to get a certificate stating whether someone is eligible. The best analogy that I can give is from my experience in the Home Office, when we set up the system for criminal record office certificates. We are keen that people who may be working with children or applying for jobs in sensitive environments should have their criminal records checked. The Government do not go about that by issuing all the information on the criminal records computers to schools, nurseries, Securicor and employment organisations, which then look at Maclean's criminal record when he comes along looking for a job and decide whether to give him one. We would be appalled if the Government behaved like that, but that is similar to what the Bill would do. The system that we set up for criminal records checks was—

Mr. Bermingham: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If I was out of order for questioning the way in which the fee was to be paid, how can reference to criminal records be in order?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As far as I am concerned, the right hon. Gentleman is talking about the method of transfer of information and whether it is desirable. That appears to be in order and within the terms of the Bill.

Mr. Maclean: Thank you for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was merely using the criminal records system as an analogy for the mechanism that we should have. That goes to the heart of the Bill. The mechanism should be similar to the system for criminal records. The Government should keep the information. When someone aged 74 or over applies for a television licence, they should state their name and address on the form and claim that they are eligible. The agencies collecting the licence fee for the BBC would send a computer printout to the Department of Social Security once a month giving the relevant names and would ask the Department to check whether those claiming a free licence were eligible. The DSS would run the names supplied of claimants claiming a free licence through its computers and send back a simple yes or no answer to the BBC or its agents. The Department would merely confirm to the BBC or its collectors whether claimant Maclean was entitled to a free television licence. That is the system we have implemented for criminal record checks, whereby the sensitive information is kept at the centre and the person inquiring is given a little chitty stating eligibility.

Mr. Flight: Given that the Government have to pay, the DSS could pay at the same time; otherwise another transaction would have to take place to pay the money over.

Mr. Maclean: I agree entirely. I would like to hear from the Government, perhaps in Committee—we may have to table amendments to secure the information—whether they have done a costing exercise on the system that they propose. I am certain that they must have done so, but have they done a costing exercise on the system that I have described? What is the difference in cost? Would it be more expensive for the DSS to retain the information and wait for the BBC or its agents to supply a list of names to check for eligibility? If my suggestion, which is more secure and answers the civil liberties question, is more expensive, we can make a qualitative judgment as to whether the civil liberties benefits of my suggestions outweigh the lower cost of the system that the Government have chosen.

The civil liberties implications of the Bill will mean that anyone who turns 74 will suddenly find their information supplied to the BBC's collecting agents, whether they have a television or not. That is my reading of the Bill, although reading the Bill does not take us very far forward. It contains no detail, and the notes tell us everything. The notes tell us that the name, address, date of birth and national insurance number will be supplied, but all that should be in the Bill. I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you care to note that the information provided in the explanatory notes is more worth while than normal. That is not to say that the notes are wonderful, but that the Bill is lousy.

The removal of the civil liberties danger is important, because if the DSS hangs on to the information it would not be issuing it willy-nilly the second someone turns 74 or 75. It would give out the information only when it was approached by a licensing authority, or the collectors for the BBC, when someone applied for a free television licence. So the information about the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—and anybody else who does not have a television and does not want a licence, and who is aged 75 or more—would remain secret on the DSS's computers, as it should. Surely that is the right way round. It is right to keep that information secret and issue it only when an application is made for a free television licence, instead of giving it out to the BBC's agents even for those who are not applying for a free licence.

A dangerous precedent will be set by the methodology that the Government have adopted. The Secretary of State, who is an honourable man, may assure the House that his regulations will cover only what is in the explanatory notes—the age, the address, the date of birth and the national insurance number of persons aged 74 or over. I believe the right hon. Gentleman. However, for the first time, a Government Department will hold sensitive and personal information and will have it ready to issue to commercial companies operating as the agents of the BBC. I have no idea when, but another Government will come to the House with an honourable, noble measure of great importance to our constituents. That measure may require the Inland Revenue, Customs and Excise or the Department of Social Security to issue yet more information about citizens to some other commercial organisation.

The Queen's Speech contained no such Bill. The Government have no plans to bounce one into the House next week, but sooner or later the precedent set tonight will mean that it will be quoted whenever a Government want to issue private information from their computers to commercial organisations. If we accept that is all right for a limited amount of such information to be issued to certain commercial organisations, there is nothing to stop another Secretary of State in another Government from exploiting that principle in ways of which this House would thoroughly disapprove.

The nature of the important information involved should be included on the face of the Bill. I did not accept the earlier explanation from the Secretary of State that

only very limited information was involved so it was not necessary to include it on the face of the Bill. Ministers normally say the opposite—that information is too complex, with too many boring, technical regulations to be so included. We are told that this Bill involves only four bits of information—age, address, date of birth and national insurance number.

That is the guts of what I want put on the face of the Bill. If that were to be done, we would not have to take the word of the Secretary of State, honourable man though he is, that the regulations will deal only with that matter. We would also guard against the danger that another Secretary of State might publish regulations requiring a little more information if the BBC or other bodies asked for it. Such bodies may believe that further information from the Government computers would help them, but putting the elements in the regulations on the face of the Bill would reassure those worried about the precedent that the Bill creates, and show that the narrow range of information required will not be widened.

I shall not dwell on clause 2, as I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) will have more to say on free television licences for all.

Clause 3(3) states that it

> is not an offence under this section . . . to disclose information in the form of a summary or collection of information so framed as not to enable information supplied under section 1 relating to any particular person to be ascertained from it.

I want to raise a point that no one has mentioned before. The Secretary of State did not mention it when he opened the debate: he did not cover it up, but he did not mention it.

Great stress was laid on the penalties that will apply to those who use the information supplied improperly or disclose information that they should not disclose. Everyone is concerned to ensure that if the Government create the precedent of giving private, sensitive, social security information about our oldest and most vulnerable pensioners to a private company, it will never be disclosed. I can accept that—but why on earth does clause 3(3) provide for the ability of the BBC or its agents—the collecting agencies—to disclose information in the form of a summary? I have heard no justification for that.

The clause provides that information about Joe Bloggs and other individuals will not be disclosed; it will be given in summary form. What sort of summary? Will the BBC issue a report in a couple of years saying that in the previous year 1 million people aged 75 to 80, 500,000 aged 82, and 100,000 aged 97 had free television licences? If so, I can understand the Department of Social Security wanting that information, although goodness knows what it would do with it. It might wish to make projections on the cost to the Government, bearing in mind what life expectancy is, and on the declining incidence of free television licences. However, given developments in medical science, and with people living longer, the Government may be facing a rising curve.

There might be some interesting information there for the Department of Social Security, the national statistical office and Government actuaries. But why on earth should the commercial organisations that are receiving this confidential information need to disclose it in summary form? Who will be the user? Who will be the beneficiary? Why should it be done?

It would be more reassuring if the Government said that the limited information that would be disclosed to the commercial companies—name, address, date of birth and national insurance number—would under no circumstances be disclosed further or published in summary form. That information might be used in court cases only if there has been an abuse or someone has been prosecuted. It is not reassuring that clause 3(3) allows a big loophole of disclosure in summary form.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): The right hon. Gentleman has been speaking for 20 minutes, and I am still not clear whether he supports the principle of pensioners over the age of 75 getting free television licences. Can he clarify his views?

Mr. Maclean: I know you listen very carefully to these debates, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and you will have heard me say at the start of my speech that I am in favour of free television licences for everyone. I am totally opposed to the way in which the BBC is funded through the licence fee. If the hon. Gentleman listens carefully, he may hear that view expressed by others who might be fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The other important loophole is clause 3(4):

> It is a defence for a person charged with an offence under this section to prove that at the time of the alleged offence he believed—
>
> (a) that he was making the disclosure in question with lawful authority, or
>
> (b) that the information in question had previously been disclosed to the public with lawful authority.

That is a wonderful open house get-out. What is the standard of proof? People in commercial companies who disclose the information or use it improperly can say in their defence, "I believed that I was doing so lawfully," or, "I believed that it was already in the public domain, so it is all right." That is far too low a threshold, and the words "he believed" must be deleted if we are to have proper security for information. Many hon. Members who are lawyers would be delighted to defend someone whose defence in court was that they believed that what they were doing was all right. They would be easy to defend, and that would drive a coach and horses through the provisions of a Bill that demands secrecy and the security of information.

Clause 3 deals with offences, but contains too many loopholes on disclosure. That must be addressed in Committee or on Report. If it is not, many people will believe—with some justification—not only that the Government have taken an unprecedented and wrong route in terms of the supply of information, but that they have done so in a cavalier manner.

We all understand that the Bill was drafted with some urgency. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport had this proposal bounced upon it, and we have all heard on the grapevine that the Government must have the Bill as urgently as possible, as they are bound to an awful timetable. We all know that, with the huge amount of Government legislation, the parliamentary draftsmen are under pressure. I do not blame the draftsmen, but the brief that they received from Ministers may have led to the loopholes.

The Bill requires some tightening up. If we cannot persuade the Government, on principle, to change the methodology that I have described in detail, we must get

[Mr. Maclean]

them to tighten up the drastic loopholes in the Bill on the release and disclosure of information. We must ensure that my constituents who do not have a television and do not need a licence have confidential information about them protected. That information must not be given willy-nilly to commercial companies who might abuse it, and then find that they have a defence because the Bill was not drafted tightly enough.

I am happy for the Bill to proceed, and I support its principle as the first step towards the complete abolition of the iniquitous television licence system. However, I wish to see a considerable tightening up of this sloppy Bill.

11.57 pm

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I appreciate that you have ruled against me on several occasions, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I shall seek not to breach your rulings by referring to sources and methods of funding.

I find it somewhat sad that I listened to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) speaking for 21 minutes; it was a short speech by his standards of recent days.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): It was 25 minutes.

Mr. Bermingham: Twenty-five minutes, I am told. The right hon. Gentleman said that he supported the Bill, and then went on to say nothing at all. In fact, he contradicted himself time and time again. The Bill is rather simple, and can be easily read. It says one thing; that we will give pensioners over the age of 75 a free television licence.

Mr. Forth: It does not say that, actually.

Mr. Bermingham: It says that pensioners will be entitled to a free television licence. I know that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has yet to bore us; but he will no doubt do so, as he bored us earlier this evening. I would not wish to trespass outside the terms of the Bill by saying what I really thought about the one hour and 10 minutes that we had from the right hon. Gentleman earlier, much of which I listened to and the rest of which I watched. As an exercise in filibustering, it was second to none, and I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on that. *[Interruption.]* He is blowing me a kiss, and I should perhaps treat him to the same—I did not know he was like that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must speak about the Bill. From what he has just said, it seems that his perception of what it is about is fundamentally incorrect. The Bill is about the conveyance of information. That, and nothing else, is what that I am willing to hear the hon. Gentleman discuss.

Mr. Bermingham: I accept unreservedly that I have once again been chastised, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In talking about the transfer of information, I was talking about what information should be transferred on the right to have, or not to have, a free television licence. *[Interruption.]* I see you shake your head, Mr. Deputy Speaker; obviously, you disagree with what I am saying. So be it. I shall try another approach: I do so, I hope, with grace and gentleness, but perhaps a little sense of worry after my 16 years and 10 months in the House. Free speech is in question. The right to question is in question. The right to comment is in question. The right to express one's views is in question, and I find all of that deeply offensive and worrying.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is once again going wide of the matter before the House. We are dealing with a fairly narrow, technical Bill, and there is no restriction whatever on free speech or expression within the terms of that Bill. The hon. Gentleman, with all his experience, must appreciate that the House can, at any one time, deal only with the particular matter before it.

Mr. Bermingham: I entirely agree, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But what is sauce for the goose must be sauce for the gander. I have listened tonight to long speeches on an extremely narrow subject. I simply say that what is sauce for the goose—myself—should be sauce for the ganders. It is as simple as that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I sense an underlying challenge to the occupant of the Chair in what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Nothing that has taken place so far can have been out of order. The Chair has had to rule from time to time, but, if hon. Members are able to speak at length while remaining in order, it is a matter for them. The Chair will pick Members up if they stray out of order. I am trying to say to the hon. Gentleman that he may not talk about the general conduct of debate, but must talk about the Bill before us.

Mr. Bermingham: I have made my preliminary points, and I intend to be brief. I hope that my example will be followed.

The Bill is indeed narrow. It deals with a transfer of information. A concession is to be given, and there is a need to qualify for it. That is an extremely narrow point, and the Bill relates to information that the BBC is entitled to obtain or have verified, directly or through an agent, so that it may recoup the fees that it would have received had there been no such concession. It must ascertain that the people to whom the concession is given qualify for it. It must ascertain how many there are.

Comment has been made—I must be careful not to go outside the narrow confines, Mr. Deputy Speaker—about how many such people there are. In truth, that can never be known or quantified. We do not know who will die between today and the date in November when the Bill will come into effect. Nothing is predictable. Actuarial estimates may be made, but accurate predictions are impossible.

Argument made on the basis of such predictions seemed to me to go outside the scope of this rather narrow Bill, which talks merely about a transfer of information. If I am straying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall be corrected again, and I may even give up. But I am trying to say merely that the Bill is so simple and straightforward that I cannot understand why there has been so much debate—a remark I make even against myself.

The BBC is entitled to verify only that people who apply for a reduced or nil-cost licence are over 75 or about to attain that age; that they have a home and an address for which computers will show that no other application has been made; and that they have a national insurance number—as we all do from the moment of our birth—from which verification of age can be obtained.

That seems to be what the Bill is all about. I do not understand why I was taken to task when I asked whether there were better ways of doing things, while another Member who said that it would be preferable to have free television licences was not taken to task. I realise that, if I pursue that line, I shall be in trouble yet again. I have had enough trouble for one day—probably today will be as troublesome as yesterday in many ways; that is so often the case.

I hope that other hon. Members' speeches will be as brief as mine so that we can proceed to a vote—if there is to be one. I sincerely hope that no one is daft enough to vote against the Bill.

12.6 am

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I take my cue from clause 2, which states:

> Information provided under section 1 may be used only in connection with television licences for which no fee is payable or reduced-fee licences.

I shall address my remarks to that point, in conjunction with the sentence in the explanatory notes which states:

> In November 1999 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that persons aged 75 or over would become entitled to receive a free television licence.

I wondered why the age of 75 had been chosen. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) attempted to give an explanation for that. The Secretary of State also alluded to that point. Two main factors were involved. The first was that 75-year-olds were retired folk, with plenty of time on their hands, who relied heavily on television for enjoyment and relaxation.

However, that argument applies equally to people aged 65 and over. Indeed, it applies increasingly to even younger people. As we know, the age at which people retire is getting lower. That fact puts a large question mark over the arbitrary choice of the age of 75 and makes it difficult to defend. If we are to talk of retirement as a factor—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot discuss that principle under this Bill. The Bill is about the disclosure of information; it is not about debating the age at which a particular form of concessionary licence is made available.

Mr. Forth: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was simply trying to participate and to debate what was said earlier. However, if you do not want me to do so, of course I must follow your guidance.

Clause 2 refers to television licences for which no fee is payable. That again raises the issue of the people for whom no fee should be payable. I am worried that such a provision would have a blanket application to a section of the population, regardless of their income. The Bill refers to television licences for which no fee is payable and then, through a mechanism to which frequent reference has been made and which several Members have queried, attempts to identify the people to whom that would apply. The whole point of the exercise would be lost if that no-fee concession were to be granted to a group of people in a blanket way, regardless of their means to pay for a normal television licence. The application of that administrative process would be misdirected.

A much better approach would be to find a way of allowing everybody to pay a much reduced licence fee, thus eliminating the mechanism suggested in the Bill. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) have suggested ways to do that. My preference would be to reduce the BBC to a core public service broadcasting operation and to dispose of all the other parts of the BBC—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must say to the right hon. Gentleman that he is going too wide, as he knows, and I must bring him back to the core of the Bill.

Mr. Forth: That is a pity. I shall certainly seek other opportunities to broaden the debate. I was simply trying to allude to remarks made by other contributors, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but you seem not to favour that approach.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am trying to help the House and to make sure that we keep within the rules of order as I judge them to be. We have a Bill before us, and I can only interpret that in the best way available to me. I believe that I have interpreted the Bill correctly, according to the purposes laid out in it, and I am just trying to encourage right hon. and hon. Members to do the same.

Mr. Forth: Indeed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is correct.

Clause 3(2) states:

> A person who is or has been employed by a recipient or engaged in the provision of services to a recipient, is guilty of an offence if . . . he discloses information.

We enter an area of doubt because the Bill makes the important distinction between a person employed by a recipient and a person engaged in the provision of services to a recipient.

I wonder whether we can be absolutely satisfied that we will be able properly to police that provision. Although I can imagine that the employment of a person provides reasonable control and, therefore, the reasonable possibility of fulfilling the intention in the clause, I wonder whether that is likely when we broaden the measure to those engaged in the provision of services. They will have an arm's-length contractual arrangement, and that may well reduce control to the extent that the intention cannot be fulfilled.

I want briefly to reinforce the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). He highlighted the fact that clause 3(4) includes a let-out provision that will allow someone to plead that he believed that information had previously been disclosed with lawful authority. That puts a question mark over the possibility of ensuring that the Bill is adequately executed, to say nothing of clause 3(3)(a), which contains the mysterious concept of

> a summary or collection of information,

[Mr. Forth]

which has yet to be fully explained. I hope that the Minister will be able to throw more light on the matter of the summary. If that term is not closely defined, it will inevitably create suspicion about the possibility of unacceptable disclosure of information.

Clause 3(6) refers to offences and penalties, which are severe. The Bill says that a guilty person is liable to

a term not exceeding six months or a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum or both,

or,

on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or a fine or both.

Those penalties seem harsh, and I wonder whether Ministers have given proper thought to whether they will be applied for first offences or whether there will be a gradation of offences for which they will be applied. Normally I am in favour of severe penalties being applied by the law in proper circumstances, but in this case the penalties appear to be disproportionate to the offence, unless it is believed that revealing information would be serious enough to merit such penalties. Some further explanation of that would be in order.

I hope that in Committee and on Report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will have the opportunity further to explore some of the matters that have not found your favour this evening. I am generally rather unhappy about the approach being taken. I am unhappy about the arbitrary choice of the age, the blanket provisions and the administrative procedures. I should prefer a radically different approach to the matter.

I hope that, in the detailed examination of the Bill in Committee and on Report, we will be able to look more closely at some of those elements, find out more of the Government's thinking than we have been able to do this evening, and tighten up the Bill, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have suggested. That must be our aim. The Bill has come before us in a rather narrow technical sense, even though the intention behind it is much broader.

12.15 am

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I admit to being slightly nervous about addressing the House. Earlier this evening, I was urged to avoid too much detail, and a little later I was urged not to be too general. I sense that I am setting off on a tightrope, so I hope that I will not fall off it.

A couple of matters have caused concern to a number of people in my constituency. Concern has been expressed by several people about the delay between the announcement—the trumpeting of the Government's intention—and its implementation. The announcement was made four months ago or thereabouts. The Bill makes it possible for that announcement to be put into practice, but the delay will not end there, and I suspect that further concern will be expressed to me by my constituents. Some help from the Minister would be useful when I try to explain to them what the Government are trying to do. There will be an eight-month delay after we have passed the legislation before the much-trumpeted benefit to people over 75 takes effect. It would be helpful to know why another eight months must go by after the debate tonight before the Bill produces the benefits that the Government claim for it.

Another aspect that is causing concern in my constituency is the 75-years-old age limit. I have been asked several times why that was chosen. People felt that it should have been lower.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot have been listening to my previous rulings. We are not going into that matter now.

Mr. Wilshire: I was not seeking to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I was simply trying to tell the House what is worrying my constituents. However, I take your point.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that that is fascinating, and the House might find an appropriate occasion to discuss it—but tonight we are discussing the Bill.

Mr. Wilshire: There is no need for me to say it again, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I have already got it off my chest.

I am concerned about the fact that we are having an important Second Reading debate after 10 pm. A matter of this importance—*[Interruption.]* Labour Members should not complain. It was the Government who decided that the previous debate could continue until 10 pm. It was not me or any member of the Opposition. The Government said that we would debate the previous measure till 10 o'clock, and some of us took them at their word.

Here we are after 10 pm, dealing with a Second Reading, and clearly the House is restive. People are tired and understandably do not want the debate to go on for the usual length of time for a Second Reading debate. I see nothing to be gained by trying to delay the House until 3 or 4 am simply to have a five or six-hour debate. However, a Second Reading deserves such debate.

There are aspects of the Bill that I support—let me get that off my chest, to avoid misunderstandings. I support the principle of free licences, whether for over-75-year-olds or for those over 65, as some of my constituents argue. Whatever decision is taken, we will be thankful for small mercies. That is the message that I get from my constituents. I have no wish to dispute the principle with the Government.

I also have no difficulty with short-term licences. If we are to go down the route of providing free licences in such a way, there should clearly be some arrangements for short-term licences for people who become 75 years old four or six months after they have had to renew a licence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is persisting in talking about matters that lie beyond the scope of the Bill. There must be other occasions when such matters would be in order. They are not in order in debate on a Bill that is solely devoted to the transfer of information. That is what he must address.

Mr. Wilshire: I appreciate that, Mr. Deputy Speaker; that makes a great deal of sense to me as well. The trouble is that others were allowed to introduce such points, so I thought that it was reasonable to comment. Nevertheless, there are two other matters that I support that are clearly raised in the Bill's wording.

The Secretary of State explained that he felt that there must be some means of minimising the administrative burden on applicants who qualified. At the heart of the Bill—not other issues that have been raised by hon. Members—is an attempt to minimise the administrative burden. I should say straight away that I have no difficulty in supporting that principle. The administrative burden is to be alleviated by reference to the Government's national insurance database. In principle, I have no difficulty with that either; it seems sensible. Use of the database would simplify matters, and it would clearly be unreasonable to say that such an aim is wrong. I do not wish to challenge the Government on such matters, but I shall turn briefly to issues that I do not support. They have been mentioned by others, so I do not need to rehearse the whole argument, although I want to make it clear where my reservations lie.

I am concerned, as is my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), about the detailed method that the Government have chosen to give effect to the principle of easing the burden, which I support. Releasing national insurance data to a third party is not a very good idea. I would therefore do everything possible to avoid doing so. I become even more nervous when I discover that the third party that is to receive such information may pass it down the line to a fourth, fifth or sixth party—to heaven knows how many other contractors.

All of us agree that such information is sensitive and needs to be kept confidential. The chances of a leak on releasing it to a third party are significant, but when that third party is given the power to release it to a fourth party and so on, the risk of a breach of confidentiality is compounded. In those circumstances, it is important that the Government look for another way of achieving an objective with which, in principle, most of us would agree.

Mr. Fabricant: Was my hon. Friend as surprised as I was to discover that, given such an inherent risk in offering information to private companies, there will apparently be no saving from doing so?

Mr. Wilshire: I shall say something in a moment on the question of cost. I have doubts about the wisdom of such an approach and suggest that the Government give further thought to turning the procedure around. Instead of easing the burden by the Government releasing the information to the BBC, I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border that it would be no more difficult for the BBC to pass the queries to the Government and for them to say either yes or no. I cannot see how there could be more work one way than the other, because the same process would be undergone, just by a different group of people. The alternative way would allow the Government to achieve their objective of easing the burden without running the risk of a breach of confidentiality.

We were told at the beginning of the debate that the provision would be a blanket concession to all households in which one person is over the age of 75. I find it difficult to accept that that is a good way to give benefits to people. Although I fully support the principle of free television licences for those aged over 75, I question whether every household that includes someone of that age needs such help from the Government.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Does not the hon. Gentleman believe that people should care for the elderly, and that the measure is an incentive for doing that?

Mr. Wilshire: I accept that it is important to debate ways in which to provide incentives for families to look after elderly relatives. However, I suspect that if I responded to the question in detail, Mr. Deputy Speaker would rightly say that my comments were outside the scope of the Bill.

I would be prepared to participate in a discussion about methods of providing incentives, but I question whether the Bill and its approach is an effective method. I do not claim to be against it in principle, or that no family should qualify, but we ought to question whether the blanket approach of applying the Bill to all families is a sensible way to achieve the objective that the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) mentioned. I am sure that, like me, he can think of families who do not need that help.

I have a query, which has also been raised by other hon. Members, about clause 5(1), which states:

> An order under this Act must be made by statutory instrument.

Enough of us have mentioned worries about the detailed procedures in the Bill to make a strong case for some sort of reassurance from the Government. It would reassure me if the Government reconsidered that provision and decided to include the order in the Bill instead of doing it by statutory instrument. It would be up-front and would meet our anxieties part way.

I have two queries about the explanatory notes. On this occasion, they are enormously helpful. There may be a good answer, which has escaped me, to my first query. Page 3 of the explanatory notes details the information that will be included in an order. I understand the reasons for mentioning the name, address and date of birth, but I am puzzled by the requirement for the national insurance number. It would be helpful if someone could put me out of my misery on that point.

My second query, which has already been mentioned, is about item 15, which states:

> There will be no effects on public sector finances or manpower.

At the beginning of the debate, I heard that there would be £340 million of administrative costs and that the cost of free licences would be another £340 million or some such figure. I hope that I wrote down the figures correctly, but if I got them wrong, I would be happy to be told differently. The Minister is not leaping up to tell me that I am wrong, so I shall persevere.

Someone, or a group of people, in the Government will have to answer the questions that the BBC posed. They have manpower implications. The explanatory notes state that the Bill will have no effect on public sector finance or manpower, but even if my figures are wrong—perhaps *Hansard* will correct them if necessary—I believe that I heard the Secretary of State explain the costs at the beginning of our proceedings. Perhaps the Minister will sort that out.

[Mr. Wilshire]

One other matter causes me anxiety. By introducing the method in the Bill to help people who are over 75, and to try to achieve that goal as painlessly as possible, we are removing one of the key reasons for the way in which we fund the BBC. Although I support the Bill in principle, I slightly regret that we are taking away one of the arguments that puts a great deal of pressure on the BBC and on the Government to have a comprehensive look at the whole question. That is a pity, and I make the point in passing.

Let me make it clear that I am perfectly happy with the principle that makes the Bill necessary. I have no quarrel with free licences for the over-75s or with what the Bill seeks to achieve by easing the administrative burden, which is a good idea. However, I am not happy with the way in which the Government are going about that. I do not have the slightest intention to oppose the Government this evening, but, in return, I hope that the Minister will respond positively to my detailed queries and, either in Committee or on Report, to the objections raised by myself and others.

12.31 am

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) set out the Conservative position. We support the measure, as I made clear during our recent debate on the order that introduced the licence fee increase as well as the free licence concession for over-75s. Given that a number of Members have queried our position throughout the debate, I can do no more than confirm that we would vote with the Government in support of the Bill in the unlikely event of the House dividing.

My hon. Friend nevertheless outlined a number of concerns. I do not intend to repeat them in detail at this late stage, except to say that the Bill represents a significant departure from the existing licensing arrangements and an unprecedented and unique use of social security information. For that reason, we welcome the Secretary of State's comment about the need to incorporate sensible safeguards. However, we wonder whether it would not be preferable to specify in the Bill rather by order the type of information and data to be provided, which he said would be narrow. We can debate that in detail in Committee.

We also urge the vital need for an information campaign. It is tempting to suggest that one in advance of the debate might have been appropriate. Such is the potential confusion, elderly people need to know where they stand. More than one hon. Member raised the question of what would happen if a pensioner aged over 75 had no licence. In the light of the Government's clear objective that over-75s should have a free licence, we would all agree that some special arrangement needs to be made for those without a licence. Prosecuting a pensioner for not having one would clearly be at odds with that objective, which came across in one of the exchanges. We would also welcome the Minister putting on the record a clear assurance that there will be no marketing use of the information made available to the BBC and its subcontractors.

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) welcomed the thought that the concession's scope may be widened. On our reading, the Bill clearly allows for that in respect of the availability to the BBC of the social security information of under-75s. He referred to his own interest in making this concession available to all pensioners and to some income support claimants. He acknowledged that that could be the thin end of the wedge. I mention that because I thought that he was surprisingly relaxed about the assertion that the impartiality of the BBC would not be compromised. That is somewhat at odds with the criticism of the licence fee increase in the recent report of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, which he chairs. The Conservative party is also critical of the increase in the licence fee.

The hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) acknowledged the potential for some abuse of civil liberties, and the need to quantify the extent of the information that will be made available, to which I have already referred. He also mentioned the legal position of a pensioner over 75 who does not have a licence.

The hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) helpfully drew attention to the problem of the concessionary licence scheme. Hon. Members on both sides of the House appreciate the difficulty that that anomaly poses. He referred to 200 householders in his constituency who have been advised that they will lose the concession, and he criticised the licensing authority. Those of us who have considered this matter and the Davies panel recommendations recognise that there is no easy answer to that anomaly.

I hope that we can achieve some consensus, because it seems incongruous, to say the least, that people who have the concession suddenly lose it if someone under the age of 60 moves into the sheltered accommodation where they reside and which allows them to enjoy it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) reminded the House of his ten-minute Bill in July 1997, which would have introduced free television licences for the over-75s. He seemed to support the Secretary of State in arguing that the over-75s were a special case. However, he did not approve of the machinery, and asked why we should not allow pensioners to send the licence fee application to the Department of Social Security. We shall want to explore that issue in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) referred to the need to ensure that the BBC achieves proper savings. We all agree with that. My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) queried the cost of this measure. It is important to note that, although it would appear from what the Secretary of State said that the total cost to the Treasury of the free licence will be £344 million—as my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey said, the figure grows every time we debate this issue—the Secretary of State also said that the cost of implementation would be £24.3 million. I therefore think it right for the House on Second Reading and when we examine these matters in Committee to have regard to the greater efficiency of the scheme and to ensure that the costs are kept to a minimum.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) drew attention to the difficulty of exercising proper scrutiny of the Bill and the scheme if anyone who raised any concern stood the risk of being accused of hostility towards the granting of free television

licences for the over-75s. That is not our position. We want to examine in detail the Government's proposed scheme to ensure that it is given proper scrutiny.

My right hon. Friend also raised some proper concerns about the mechanism for the transfer of information. He questioned whether the DSS could provide the necessary information in a different way. I will read carefully what he said. I think that the Committee stage will give us a good opportunity to test whether the Government's scheme is the most sensible, or whether we could find an alternative that would avoid the need to give the information about people's social security records to the BBC or other third parties.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) feared that the penalties might be disproportionate to the offences. That, too, will need to be considered in Committee.

It should be clear from what my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey and I have said that we warmly support the Bill's objective, which is laudable. However, it represents a major change, and it is reasonable for us to ask whether the assurances given by the Secretary of State are adequate. I also think that we need to be clear that the £344 million direct payment to the BBC does not undermine its impartiality and independence. More to the point, will free licences for so many residents of the country begin to undermine the concept of the television licence itself? It will certainly encourage some to challenge the requirement for them to pay.

We should keep those concerns in mind, and recognise that, in a multi-channel age, as the principle of the universal licence fee comes under attack, it will be essential for both the BBC and the Government to demonstrate that resources are being used efficiently, that licence-fee increases are being kept within reasonable bounds, that the BBC continues to be independent and impartial, and—with specific reference to the Bill—that concessions such as free licences command popular support. While we are more than satisfied that the proposal for a free licence for older pensioners is genuinely welcomed by the public, we have a duty to ensure that it is implemented—as the Secretary of State himself said—as simply as possible, but with efficiency and security. We look forward to ensuring in Committee that those aims are realised, so that the 1 November implementation date can be achieved.

12.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Janet Anderson): We have had a useful and wide-ranging debate on what is necessarily a narrowly focused Bill. Its purpose is clear: to assist in the provision of free television licences for people aged 75 or over. I was pleased to note support for the concession, although I know that some Members would like it to be more widely available. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) made that point.

It is clear from the responses that we have received since the announcement of our proposal that the concession is much welcomed by older pensioners, but that many are concerned about what they must do to obtain their free licence, and are anxious not to miss out. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have received many letters from Members who are eager to know the details. The Government are especially keen to ensure that the administration of free licences for the over-75s does not impose unnecessary burdens, and thus undo much of the good of the concession. Our aim is as far as possible to enable elderly people to claim it from the comfort of their armchairs.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) welcome the concession, because I believe that, in the past, he has described it as a hollow gimmick. I am glad that he no longer takes that view.

There must be a proper understanding of how the arrangement will operate, and we are working closely with TV Licensing and the Department of Social Security to ensure that people have the information that they need.

I telephoned TV Licensing this morning. Any hon. Member who does so will find that, in the recorded choices, there is clear instruction on which number to press for information about the free television licence. This week, I received my new licence in the post from TV Licensing. It says clearly that pensioners over 75 will be entitled to a free licence from 1 November.

Mr. Fabricant: I am curious. The Minister telephoned TV Licensing and got the recorded messages. Did she eventually manage to speak to a real human being?

Janet Anderson: I did and she was very courteous. She dealt with my point very competently.

Mr. Jim Dowd (Lord Commissioner to the Treasury): It was his mother.

Janet Anderson: I do not know whether it was the hon. Gentleman's mother.

Many hon. Members have asked what will be the position of pensioners over 75 who do not hold free television licences when they should. I am sure that TV Licensing will be sensitive to that matter. As my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) said, the Government are not in the business of sending 80-year-olds to prison because they were perhaps confused about the rules, but it is our job and that of TV Licensing to ensure that as much information is available as widely as possible.

The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who is no longer in the Chamber, also referred to the scheme as a gimmick. He raised the question of whether it would mean the Government interfering with the independence of the BBC. It is wrong even to suggest that. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on the other Opposition Bench confirm that he believed that to be the case, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton.

One of the reasons for doing it in that way is that it is very simple. We want pensioners to be able easily to avail themselves of the free licence from their armchair, but it is important to retain the licence principle. There is no question of the Government, through the process, taking a stake in the BBC. As my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South said, the Government are making good a revenue loss. I clarify the position. As the Secretary of State and I have said on numerous occasions, we believe that the licence fee is the best possible way in which to fund the BBC for the foreseeable future.

[Janet Anderson]

The hon. Member for East Surrey asked why the over-75s must apply to opt in. As I say, that is because it preserves the long-standing tradition that everyone who has a television must have a licence and that the fee goes to fund the BBC. The introduction of the concession does not provide sufficient cause to question that basic principle.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Secretary of State's part in the matter. I refer him to subsections (3) and (4) of the Bill, which refers to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who will make orders describing the sort of information that may be supplied to the BBC. I repeat for the benefit of the House: it is intended to define only a very narrow range of information: the age, address, date of birth and the national insurance number of persons aged 74 or over.

It is intended that an order under the Bill should enable the Department of Social Security and Northern Ireland Department to disclose to the BBC the fact that such a person has died. That is important. Under the amendment that was tabled by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and subsequently withdrawn, the information would have to be sought every year and information about when an eligible pensioner had died would not automatically be passed to the BBC, and that could cause great distress to families.

Several hon. Members have asked whether the information to be disclosed can be in the Bill. Although the information that may be disclosed is not in the Bill, I assure the House that it will appear in an order, subject to negative resolution of either House. I hope that that gives hon. Members the reassurance that they seek.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton dealt very competently with the question that was asked about the number of households. Although it is difficult for us to be accurate about the number now, we estimate that it is about 3 million households.

I should also deal now with the issue of costs—as it has been raised by various hon. Members who seemed to be a little confused. We estimate that, in 2000-01, the cost of the concession will be £344 million, with an additional £23.4 million in administration costs in the first year. It is important that those administration costs are kept to a minimum, and I assure the House that we shall be ensuring that there is pressure on TV Licensing and on the Department of Social Security to ensure that that happens.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: The administration costs in the first year will of course include start-up costs. Could the Minister give a figure on the start-up costs and also a figure on what she expects the administration costs to be in subsequent years?

Janet Anderson: I do not have that information now, but perhaps we can discuss the matter in Committee. I suspect that the matter will become clearer as arrangements for the scheme are implemented.

I thank the hon. Member for Lewes for his welcome for the provision and for his confirmation that he does not believe that it will affect either the BBC's independence or the BBC's income. On his point on administration costs, we understand that hon. Members are rightly concerned about those costs. Everything that needs to be done will be done to keep down those costs.

The hon. Member for Lewes also asked whether claims of arrears would be considered when pensioners had been entitled to the concession but had not known about it. Claims of arrears in such a concession pose various difficulties, especially as they would involve cash refunds. In particular, as I am sure that he will appreciate, retrospective proof of entitlement covering several years will not be straightforward. However, we are willing to consider that issue further in introducing the concession.

Mr. Baker: The Minister's comments underline the need to ensure that the information provided now is as full as possible, so that the situation does not arise. May I also tell her that I renewed my television licence earlier today—in time for this debate—and that there was no mention anywhere on it of the forthcoming change allowing those over 75 to qualify for a free licence? Why is the information not on the television licence itself?

Janet Anderson: I received my television licence, and there were some details—although I cannot remember the exact words—of the concession on it. Nevertheless, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that TV Licensing will be writing to everyone with full details of the concession, including details on the provision of part licences, to ensure that as much information as possible is available as widely as possible.

Hon. Members also asked questions about the reason for the delay in introducing the legislation and in implementing the concession until 1 November. I am sure that hon. Members will agree that it is important that we get this right and ensure that all those who are entitled to the concession receive it. We therefore have to provide time for the BBC and TV Licensing to prepare for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) raised an issue that I know concerns various hon. Members who have had similar experiences in their own constituencies. The issue is also often raised with us in correspondence. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier in the debate, we have removed one small anomaly in situations in which entitlement to the concession is based on housing provision—namely, in the sheltered housing scheme. Previously, strictly speaking, men over 60 in such a development would have threatened the concession for everyone in that development. We have now said that, in future, the qualifying age for both men and women in such housing will be 60. The change was introduced with the order that increased the television licence fee.

In our response to Davies, and in considering what to do, we have made it plain that, although we accept that the concessionary licence scheme is unfair and unsatisfactory, we believe that to try to tinker around with it would produce only more anomalies. We believe that, by introducing the provision to give free licences to all over-75s, we have started to strip unfairness out of the scheme. We shall look into the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley raised.

From 1 May to 1 November, when the scheme comes in, is a period of six months. Those who will be eligible on 1 November need purchase only a six-month licence.

Mr. Fabricant: I do not want to delay the House, but what will be the arrangement for those who pay by direct debit?

Janet Anderson: I imagine that it will still be possible for them to purchase part-licences, but we shall have to

look at the detail. That is one reason for trying to approach the issue in a measured and responsible way, so that we can ensure that pensioners are able to avail themselves of the concessionary scheme in the simplest way possible.

I assure the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) that the scheme is purely for over-75s. Like the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, whose proposed amendment was subsequently withdrawn, he said that it should be possible to apply directly to the Department of Social Security. We decided that such a system would duplicate bureaucracy and administration, and therefore the cost. We thought that it was much simpler to have a unit at one end—at the BBC—that would have the necessary information, rather than having two units.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) raised a number of points that have already been covered. We did not envisage that one of the likely consequences of the legislation would be to persuade his ageing mother to move in with him, but I am very pleased that she will benefit from the concession and I hope that he will constantly remind her that it was given to her by a Labour Government.

We have dealt with most of the issues and we shall look at the rest in Committee. I am sorry that the right hon. Members for Penrith and The Border and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) took so long on this Bill and the earlier Bill that the House considered, delaying us until this late hour. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border mentioned the way in which criminal records were dealt with at the Home Office. A system that is regarded as proportional for information such as criminal records is not proportional for a national insurance number. We are talking about different kinds of information. I think that most hon. Members accept that the Bill is essential to ensure that pensioners get the concession.

I do not intend to delay the House much longer. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) raised several issues that we can deal with in Committee. I have confirmed the cost and administration implications. I thank the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) for his measured and thoughtful response. I hope that he will be able to ensure that Conservative Members facilitate the passage of the Bill. Around 3 million pensioners will benefit from the concession, which was fiercely resisted by the Conservatives when they were in government. We want to ensure that those pensioners benefit as quickly as possible. I look forward to co-operation from all hon. Members to facilitate that. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees).

BANANA IMPORTS

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 13048/99, a draft Council Regulation amending Council Regulation (EEC) No. 404/93 on the common organisation of the market in bananas; and supports the Government's objective of achieving a revised EU banana regime which will not be challenged in the World Trade Organisation and which will reflect EU commitments to Caribbean and African countries, particularly the UK's traditional suppliers in the Caribbean.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd West) be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee, and Mr. John Smith be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. John McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITION

Policing (South Cumbria)

12.59 am

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): This petition, which has been signed by more than 3,800 of my constituents, represents strong feeling across south Cumbria about the level of police resourcing in our area and, in particular, about the fate of Milnthorpe police station.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons

The petition of residents of South Lakeland

Declares that there is growing concern in south Cumbria about recent reductions in the policing of our area, shown by the closure of police stations and the reduction of the number of police officers.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons encourage the Home Secretary to implement immediately the inclusion of a sparsity element in the funding formula for Home Office support for police forces and urge him to ensure genuinely equal access to policing in all parts of our country.

And the petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Magistrates Courts

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

1 am

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): It is 1 o'clock in the morning, and I am grateful to the hon. Members who are still present, especially my hon. Friends the Members for Lewes (Mr. Baker), for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed). Throughout the country, especially in country towns and rural areas, there is great concern about the future of our magistrates courts. That is especially so in Devon and Cornwall. If my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he wishes to emphasise the disquiet that is felt in our part of the south-west.

I speak tonight to highlight the problems of funding for magistrates courts. I have had meetings and correspondence over the past few months with the Minister on that point, especially as it affects the two counties. First, the Government's policy is to insist on 3 per cent. per annum savings from magistrates courts budgets. I have taken that point up in writing with the Minister and she tells me that 3 per cent. is an efficiency savings initiative. I have been informed by her that an efficiency target of a minimum of 3 per cent. was set out for the Lord Chancellor's Department and magistrates courts in the comprehensive spending review in 1998, which covers three years, from 1999–2000 to 2001–02.

At a meeting on 2 March 2000 in the Minister's office, I was accompanied by several hon. Members and some magistrates. The Minister made it clear to the meeting that the cuts being imposed on Devon and Cornwall were not cost driven.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so early in his speech. I would like him to acknowledge that at no point did I accept his definition of the efficiency targets as being cuts.

Mr. Burnett: That is exactly what the Minister did say, but they are, in effect, cuts and I shall say exactly why they are. Many magistrates courts committees believe that they have to cut their budgets by 3 per cent. a year for at least three years. That is the impression that the Minister, or her Department, has given magistrates courts committees in Devon and Cornwall, and elsewhere. Those cuts are even greater when one considers that no allowance will be made for inflation. If inflation is 2 per cent. a year, that means that the cuts will be 5 per cent. per annum.

If that is the policy, it is utterly irresponsible of the Government to impose it.

Jane Kennedy *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Burnett: Well, I look forward to hearing the Minister's views and I hope that she can contradict the impression, which all magistrates courts seem to have, of the need to make cuts of 3 per cent. per annum. After all—in a move that makes the policy even more paradoxical—the Government have sanctioned pay increases for the staff of magistrates courts of 3 per cent. per annum. How can cuts of 5 per cent. per annum for three years be reconciled with increases in staff costs of 3 per cent. per annum? I hope that the Minister will address that specific point in her response to the debate.

There is complete confusion. Magistrates courts committees believe that they must cut expenditure by at least 3 per cent. per year. However, not only have staff costs risen by 3 per cent. per year, but the work of magistrates courts is set to increase substantially, thanks to the incorporation in our law of the European convention on human rights, and thanks to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

In a letter to me dated 16 March, the Minister did not define efficiency savings. I hope that she will do so when she responds this evening. She wrote:

> Improving efficiency does not mean cuts in funding. It is about ensuring that the money that is available provides value for money.

She went on to say that, on current plans, there would be about £379 million in revenue and capital expenditure on magistrates courts for the year 2001-02, an increase of just over 5.25 per cent. in the three years covered by the last spending review.

If that is so, why is this year's budget for the Devon and Cornwall magistrates courts committee to be cut? Where is the increased expenditure being applied? I am also anxious to know exactly what an efficiency saving is, how it is measured and who measures it.

My final point about funding and the pressures imposed on the Government to close courts is one that I have raised with the Minister in the past. It has much to do with the Lord Chancellor's liaising with other Government Departments—joined-up Government, in other words.

At the meeting on 2 March, I asked the Minister a question that I reiterated in my letter of 7 March. I asked what cost-benefit analysis is done when efficiency savings give rise to court closures. In Devon and Cornwall, it is proposed to close 13 courts. What will the effect of those closures be on the budgets of the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, magistrates, the probation service, the Legal Aid Board, and the other users of the courts? Small savings by the Lord Chancellor's Department will be far outweighed by significant increases in the budgets of other central Government Departments, and in those of local government departments.

In her letter of 16 March, the Minister stated that that information was not collected centrally—an outrageous reply. It is like a company director who has dismissed half the sales force without consulting anyone then being surprised at a dramatic fall in sales. Central Government provide 80 per cent. of the costs of magistrates courts. They should not cut the budgets of those courts, unilaterally and arbitrarily, without a clear knowledge of the impact that those cuts will have. Costs for other central Government Departments and agencies, and for local government departments, will be significantly increased. Central Government should make a proper cost benefit study or impact assessment and should give sensible guidance on the matter to magistrates courts committees.

Finally, I must stress that the Government should understand the particular difficulties faced by sparsely populated counties such as Devon and Cornwall.

Courts are located many miles from each other, roads are poor and public transport is scarce or non-existent. Such rural counties are a special case.

This country has a lay magistracy of which we can all be proud, and efficient courts. The Minister must not be party to measures that will undermine a crucial part of our rural infrastructure.

1.10 am

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) and to the Minister for allowing me to make a short contribution to the debate. I must first declare a special interest. Not only is my area greatly affected by the proposals, but my wife is a justice of the peace, so I am particularly well briefed on the subject.

I wish to underline two points that my hon. Friend made. As he said, the Minister was gracious enough to receive a deputation of representatives of benches from Devon and Cornwall and a number of Members of Parliament from all parties in the area. She spelled out in no uncertain terms what the Department considered to be efficiency savings. I want to explore that a little further.

I should first explain that Cornwall has been through this process before. In my own part of Cornwall, under the Conservative Government, eight courts were closed and similar arguments were used at the time. We know all about trying to make efficiency savings. They have been made with great difficulty. Preventing any deterioration in the service has placed great strain on the magistracy and the clerks. However, there comes a point when one can go no further.

Let me briefly illustrate the sort of savings that are being considered. The closure of the court facilities at Launceston, in my area, is estimated to result in savings of some £13,500. However, in a letter to some of us in the area, the magistrates courts committee has already acknowledged that, of that £13,500, an additional cost of £9,000 will immediately be incurred by the magistracy and the clerks, thereby reducing the figure to £4,500. As my hon. Friend has said, that takes no account of the costs of all the other services to the court. Even before one starts talking about those who give voluntarily of their time to attend court as witnesses, or in any other capacity, the added costs of the police, the probation service, the Law Society and legal aid come to a great deal more than £4,500. So the savings are not merely notional, but non-existent.

What does the Department mean by efficiency? Is it more efficient if witnesses are not prepared to come forward when they know that there is no public transport to the new court house to which they are summoned? Will it be more efficient justice that more and more lay JPs will simply not be prepared to serve? That is already the case in my area. A working farmer cannot give up the amount of time necessary to go a longer distance to the court house. Most importantly, how can we guarantee that the quality of the justice dispensed from a more remote court system will mean that we will get real justice?

Efficiency is a word that is much thrown about in the Chamber. When it comes to providing local justice, if it is not truly just justice, it is clearly not efficient. In those terms, efficiency savings are simply a chimera. They do not exist, because we are not providing the service to the community.

Devon and Cornwall are at the forefront of the problem. That may be as well, because when the chairs of the various benches came to see the Minister, along with my hon. Friend and myself, it was made clear that Devon and Cornwall are special cases. The Minister has told me previously that the Department is prepared to be flexible in terms of the efficiency savings and the consequences for particular rural areas. Devon and Cornwall will require that flexibility. It is already inevitable that people will have to travel very long distances.

The Minister said at our meeting that she wanted a higher standard of court facilities. She wanted to prevent, if necessary, a witness and a defendant from being in the same part of the building together for any length of time. The chair of one of the benches pointed out to her and to us that if that witness and that defendant had already spent two hours on a bus together getting to the court, it was complete folly to worry about what would happen in the building.

Sometimes seeking perfection means that we do not make any real improvements at all, and that is the case that we are putting before the House tonight.

1.15 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): Just over two months ago—in replying to a debate on magistrates courts initiated by the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) and attended by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett)—I said that I expected to return to this subject. Since that debate, I have met hon. Members from Devon and Cornwall constituencies and have written to them. I have also answered two parliamentary questions—one from the hon. Gentleman himself.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I welcome the opportunity to return to this important issue, and to set out clearly the Government's position. I want also to challenge the assertion that the efficiency targets for the Lord Chancellor's Department are cuts. In doing so, I will return to ground that has been very well trodden over the past few weeks. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) will have braced himself with regard to that fact.

First, I should remind the House of the responsibilities of magistrates courts committees. MCCs are made up of magistrates drawn from local benches in their area. The committees are selected by local magistrates. They have a statutory responsibility for the effective and efficient management of the courts in their area.

That means that magistrates from Devon and Cornwall manage the courts in Devon and Cornwall; magistrates from Merseyside, where my constituency lies, manage the courts on Merseyside; magistrates from London manage the courts in London; and so on. Parliament has set a national framework within which the courts are run. However, the Lord Chancellor does not manage the courts, and does not tell MCCs how to manage the courts.

Decisions affecting the magistrates courts and the services that they provide, the way that they are staffed and the location of courthouses are taken by local magistrates—not by central Government. It is local people who are best placed to consider these issues from a local perspective.

Mr. Burnett: We are aware of the points that the Parliamentary Secretary has made. We are anxious to find

[Mr. Burnett]

out exactly what the Government's policy is on central Government spending; the impact of closures on other services; and the illusory savings that the Government think they will make.

Jane Kennedy: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to elucidate that point, and I hope to be able to satisfy him on it.

The Lord Chancellor, as the Minister responsible for magistrates courts, has certain specific functions. One of them—which I exercise on his behalf—is to determine appeals by the paying authorities, the local councils, against MCC proposals to close courthouses. That is why, in debates and exchanges with hon. Members, I do not and cannot comment on individual MCC proposals. In the event of an appeal, each case will be carefully considered on its merits. It would be wholly wrong of me to prejudge the quasi-judicial decision that I must make should an appeal be lodged.

Beyond those specific functions, the Lord Chancellor is concerned with the performance of the magistrates courts and the contribution that they make to the criminal justice system. That has a high priority, in accordance with the Government's aims for the criminal justice system. Those aims are: to reduce crime and the fear of crime and their social and economic costs; to dispense justice fairly and efficiently; and to promote confidence in the rule of law.

Accordingly, and rightly, performance standards and targets are set for the magistrates courts. Users of the courts are entitled to no less. It is for MCCs to decide how they achieve the targets. The Lord Chancellor does not dictate how they should do it.

Of course—this brings me specifically to the question of funding—MCCs, like every other public sector organisation, must operate within the budgetary allocations that they are given. I emphasise that they are not given any instructions about how to do that, and I hope that that answers one point made by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon.

There has been some debate during the past weeks about the efficiency targets set for magistrates courts, which have been represented as cuts in funding. It is quite right that we should continue to seek better value for the money provided for running magistrates courts. The amount that we spend on magistrates courts is very significant. Before I give some figures, it may help if I remind the House that MCCs are funded by local authorities, and that the Lord Chancellor provides grants to those authorities to cover 80 per cent. of the cost.

For the year that began on 1 April, we expect total spending on magistrates courts to be in the region of £372 million, a figure already known to the hon. Gentleman. That includes the contribution from local authorities. Of that, £343 million is for the revenue costs of running the courts, and £29 million is for capital expenditure on buildings and information technology. In 2001–02, under current plans, we expect to spend £379 million, an increase of more than 5 per cent. in the three years covered by the 1998 comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Burnett: Why, therefore, do magistrates in Devon and Cornwall, the areas that I know best, labour under the impression that they must reduce expenditure by 3 per cent. a year for at least three years? Other MCCs are under the same misapprehension.

Jane Kennedy: I honestly cannot answer that. We are talking about efficiency improvements, not cash cuts. We are seeking more for the money available. It is possible to receive more money and be more efficient if the increase in output—the performance of the courts—is proportionately greater than the increase in spending. We are concerned about the quality of what is delivered, not just the volume.

It may be helpful if I refer briefly to the way in which money is distributed, because funding for any MCC depends both on the total and the mechanism for sharing it. That mechanism is a calculation based on a formula that is currently being reviewed. We aim to have a new mechanism in place for the allocation of money for the financial year beginning in April 2001.

A substantial amount of money is spent on magistrates courts, but funds are not unlimited. The taxpayer's pockets are not bottomless, and that includes council tax payers as well as the payers of national taxes, because the courts are in part locally funded. Taxpayers—local and national—have a right to expect that the money provided should be spent well to obtain maximum value.

That brings me back to efficiency gains. MCCs are far from alone in being set an efficiency target. The target of 3 per cent. set for magistrates courts is exactly the same as the target for the Lord Chancellor's Department as a whole. It is also the target that was set generally in the last spending review for Departments responsible for the criminal justice system. That does not mean that expenditure is being cut. I have already given figures to show that spending has increased. Our policy is about doing better with the money that is available.

In the magistrates courts, we expect significant efficiency gains from our modernisation initiatives. That was made clear in the statement to both Houses in October 1997 about the MCC amalgamation programme. When the programme is completed in April next year, the number of MCCs will have reduced from 96 at the time of the statement to 42. That programme will make a large contribution to improving efficiency—leading to reduced overheads and to the promotion of economies of scale.

As I said in the House on 1 February, on the basis of an assessment by consultants of potential savings from a proposed merger of MCCs in the midlands, it is estimated that gains equivalent to 6 per cent. of the amalgamating MCCs budgets could be realised. Amalgamations will also contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of the criminal justice system as a whole by aligning the boundaries of MCCs with those of other agencies.

We are also improving information technology, which will benefit the magistrates courts and the criminal justice system as a whole. Improved procedures will be introduced—for example, early administrative hearings—which achieve quicker disposal of cases and, as a consequence, release resources.

Those central initiatives contribute significantly to efficiency gains, and provide the foundation on which MCCs can build. Efficiency does not necessarily mean getting the same output for less money. It is about getting proportionately more for any level of funding. That is not

necessarily measured only in volume. A better quality of service for any given level of resources would represent a gain in efficiency.

That is important in relation to the courthouse location debate because MCCs' courthouse location proposals—which courts are placed in which localities—reflect the aim and expectation that services and facilities offered to all court users be brought up to the standards required in the 21st century. Cases should take no longer to pass through the system than is necessary and the process of administering justice should be improved.

Older courthouses do not have the facilities that should be expected. Of course, the needs of local justice must be considered very carefully—especially access to the courts. I should always expect that to be explored most thoroughly in any proposal that might come to me on appeal.

However, an MCC's responsibility to consider those issues must be accepted. As the hon. Member for North Cornwall pointed out, cost savings are often small in the case of old buildings which lack modern facilities, but where they can be made, they are available to be ploughed back to support improved services and performance. Provided that all the issues and legitimate concerns have been weighed in the balance, that, clearly, must be a factor in any decision about courthouse location.

Finally, looking to the future, I should mention the review of the criminal courts that Lord Justice Auld is conducting. He will produce authoritative advice on the lines on which the criminal justice system will be developed. He is due to report by the end of December and it is clearly too soon to say whether his advice will have any impact on the matters we have debated today. However, it is fair that I should remind the House of that review.

As I have said, we are reviewing the mechanism for allocating money to MCCs. One of the proposals that will be examined, which will be of interest to the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon, is a sparsity factor to reflect any higher costs of running magistrates courts in spread-out, sparsely populated, rural MCC areas. However, I can give no undertakings on that; we must await the outcome of the review.

The comprehensive spending review covered the three years from 1999 to 2002. The House will be aware that the spending review for the three years from April is now under way. The outcome of that will be known later in the year. The Lord Chancellor will put his case for the level of funding he believes is needed for magistrates courts, as he will for all the other matters for which he has ministerial responsibility. Of course, other Ministers will be doing the same and the outcome will reflect the Government's spending priorities. Whatever the outcome, the pressure to achieve greater value for money in magistrates courts will continue. It is right that it should.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past One o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 11 April 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS]*
(BY ORDER)

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 18 April.

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 18 April.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ethical Foreign Policy

1. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): If he will make a statement on the implementation of the ethical dimension of his foreign policy since May 1997. [117165]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We have a proud record of pressing for torture to be banned world wide, the death penalty to be abolished, anti-personnel land mines to be banned and extreme forms of child labour to be ended. We helped to achieve an International Criminal Court. We have been lifting the stranglehold of debt off poor countries, hugely increasing our overseas aid and banning arms exports that could be used for either external aggression or internal oppression. Never before have a Government given such a priority to promoting human rights in British foreign policy.

Mr. Amess: Given the Government's extraordinary double standards—for instance, in their dealings with China and Zimbabwe—how can the Foreign Secretary consider a visit to Iran, whose regime carries out the gouging of eyes and the amputation of its citizens' limbs? Will he defend that as an ethical act? Will he reconsider his visit? Will he at least condemn such brutal acts against the citizens of Iran?

Mr. Hain: Of course everybody in the House, led by the Foreign Secretary, will condemn actions such as the gouging out of eyes, but is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that my right hon. Friend should not go to Tehran when he has the opportunity to support the reform programme carried out by President Khatami, which has improved human rights there and made Iran freer than it has been for a long time? Should we stop trying to make the world better because we cannot make it perfect? The Government try to make it better at every opportunity.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): The Minister rightly mentioned the banning of land mines with pride. Could that be extended to cluster bombs?

Mr. Hain: I will happily look at that proposal. Cluster bombs are in a different position from anti-personnel land mines. Through the Ottawa convention—we led that process—we achieved a worldwide ban on anti-personnel land mines. I know that my hon. Friend welcomes that.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The Minister will remember that the Foreign Secretary's statement laid particular emphasis on human rights. After the treatment that has been meted out to Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Council of Europe's decision to begin proceedings that may lead to Russia's suspension, do the Government feel no discomfort at the notion of welcoming Mr. Putin to London next weekend? This is the man who became president after presiding over the indiscriminate and disproportionate shelling of civilians in Chechnya. Should not the visit be postponed until Russian actions match Russian words?

Mr. Hain: We very much welcomed Mary Robinson's visit to Chechnya. It was important that she went and Britain supported her in that task. We use every opportunity to take up human rights matters with the Russians, as the Prime Minister did with President-elect Putin and as will occur when he visits Britain shortly, on the basis that our involvement is without illusions. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is perhaps asking us to boycott any contact with the Russians to leave us with clean hands, but that does not improve people's rights in Russia, which is the objective for which we have been consistently working.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is both an ethical and a moral imperative for the United Kingdom to do everything possible to help the people of Ethiopia, whom we see dead and dying on our television screens every night? Is he aware that the European Union has sent only half the food aid that it promised last year? Will he do everything in his power to speed up the process of getting that food to the people? If not, it will be too late.

Mr. Hain: I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend has raised the crisis in Ethiopia. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is leading the way in providing more food aid than any other country, apart from the United States. We are very aware that 8 million people face starvation in Ethiopia and the situation is dire. Britain has a proud record of providing food aid and of making sure that the other international institutions address the serious crisis there.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): In this week's *New Statesman*, the Minister reveals to us all that

he is seen by the Foreign Secretary as his soul mate. As they are so close, perhaps the Minister can tell us whether the Foreign Secretary supports the Minister's view, expressed in the same article, that the ethical dimension of foreign policy was "the hook" on which this Labour Government found themselves, was oversold to begin with, and has now been abandoned and

consigned to the memory hole.

How does the Foreign Secretary feel about his ethical foreign policy now that even his deputy publicly denounces it?

Mr. Hain: I realise that the hon. Lady has used all her considerable creative energies to try to read into the *New Statesman* interview numerous things that were not there. Let me say, however, that I am proud to work alongside my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, whose soul mate I have been for many years. That is true on my side, anyway.

My right hon. Friend has presided over a foreign policy that has given Britain a leading role in the world in the defence of human rights, with a strong ethical dimension of which we can be proud. That is recognised by countries throughout the world.

Let me add that it is a bit rich to be lectured about ethics by the party that was happy to arm the Indonesian dictator Suharto, happy to support the repression of the East Timor people, and happy for its Ministers to mislead Parliament over the supply of arms to Iraq, as exposed in the Scott report. We take no lessons from that party about ethical foreign policy.

Lisbon Summit

2. **Jane Griffiths** (Reading, East): If he will make a statement on the follow-up plans to implement the decisions of the Lisbon EU summit on economic reform. [117166]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The Lisbon summit arose from a British-Spanish initiative. Its agenda reflected Britain's commitment to economic reform within Europe. The summit committed the European Union to removing barriers to e-commerce, and to ensuring that access to the internet in Europe is as competitive as any in the world.

At Lisbon, the European Union agreed that the goal of full employment was back on the agenda. It was the first time for a decade that it has done so. We will now work with the Commission to follow up its conclusions. The commitment to hold annual summits in the spring to review progress will ensure that the Lisbon agenda remains a high priority for the European Union.

Jane Griffiths: Does my right hon. Friend share my delight that that goal of full employment is now seriously and explicitly back on the agenda in Europe? Does he agree that what Britain must do is engage in Europe, and not seek to let down the people of this country as the Conservative party seeks to do by opting out?

Mr. Cook: I absolutely agree. I note that the Opposition spokesman on foreign affairs put out a press statement on the day of the Lisbon summit referring to the "job-destroying" working time directive and social chapter. Since the Government came to office and introduced both those measures, we have created 800,000 more jobs than were created at the time the Conservative Government were resisting them.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): How does this country's continued support for Turkey's accession to the European Union square with an ethical foreign policy, given Turkey's awful human rights record?

Madam Speaker: Order. The question is about economic reform.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Did the Foreign Secretary read the story in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* last week which claimed that Britain was shaping the agenda within the European Union, and bemoaned the fact that Germany was no longer undertaking that role? Is that not a powerful statement that we can and do secure the best for Britain from Europe, and is it not the most powerful response possible to the xenophobic isolationism of the Conservative party, which ill serves the British national interest and would put 3 million British jobs at risk?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The agenda of the European Union is dominated by two initiatives taken by the British Government, to promote European security and to promote economic reform within Europe. The people of Britain are seeing real benefits from the decision to provide a legal base for our border controls for the first time during our membership of the European Union, and from the decision to give us one of the best deals in regard to structural funds among all European Union countries. That is the gain of positive engagement in Europe, all of which Conservative Members would put at risk.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): May I remind the right hon. Gentleman that it was the Prime Minister himself who last year, speaking to the CBI, criticised the working time directive for being over-regulatory? That being the case, why did he not demand its reform at Lisbon? Surely what businesses actually want, instead of all the talk of an inclusive, dynamic and knowledge-based economy, is less red tape, less bureaucracy and less interference, not pointless prime ministerial techno-babble.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman obviously has not read the conclusions of the Lisbon summit. If he had done so, he would have seen that it was not techno-babble of any kind, European or British. It provides specific deadlines by which specific action must be taken: this year, a legal framework for e-commerce; next year, a fully liberalised telecommunications market; by 2001, a Community-wide patent; by 2003, electronic access to all public services. Those measures are sought and wanted by business. Thanks to the Government, they have been secured within Europe.

BBC World Service

3. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What plans he has to increase funding for the World Service to meet the costs of the digital revolution. [117167]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): The Government granted the BBC World Service an extra £44.2 million over the three-year comprehensive spending review period 1999–2002, partly to finance expansion into online and other digital services.

Mr. Rendel: The World Service is producing record audiences for its radio services. I am sure that the Minister would join me in congratulating the World Service on that, but the expansion so far into online services has produced a full online service only for English, Chinese and Arabic. What plans does he have to enable the World Service to expand its full online services to the other main world languages?

Mr. Hain: I agree that the expansion in the World Service's listenership throughout the world is extremely welcome. More than 150 million people listen to it weekly. That is good news. The online service is growing from strength to strength. I would like it to expand to other languages where possible and where its management decides, but it is still the best used internet service anywhere in the world—and long may it remain so.

Mr. Piara S. Khabra (Ealing, Southall): What progress has been made in the negotiations between the Foreign Office and the military Government in Pakistan on restoring democracy? Has my hon. Friend assessed the political situation in Pakistan?

Madam Speaker: Order. I am afraid that that supplementary question is out of order on this question. If the hon. Gentleman looks at it, he will see that it deals with the World Service and the digital revolution.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Admirable as the new services that the World Service is operating are, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the BBC is adequately funded to continue necessary transmitter investment so as to make certain that the existing short wave radio service, which can reach some of the more obscure parts of the world, is maintained and sustained?

Mr. Hain: I know of the right hon. Gentleman's close interest in the matter. I agree that it is important that the World Service be allowed to expand its short wave service. It is expanding its FM service massively too, which is also to be welcomed. We have provided an average yearly real-terms increase in funding of 3.9 per cent. for the World Service, which is in stark contrast with the record of the Conservative Government, who cut its funding year after year.

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): Has my hon. Friend seen the reports in the press that suggest that the new director general of the BBC is considering closing Bush house? Will he make representations to the BBC to let him know how important the World Service is to the House?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend that the World Service is important to the House. Indeed, it is important to the Government, which is why we have increased its funding substantially. As to whether the World Service is sited in Bush house, or whether the BBC can best utilise its capital and other revenue resources on some other site, that is a matter for the BBC, its board of governors and its management.

Hungary

6. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen political and economic links between the UK and Hungary. [117170]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The UK has an excellent relationship with Hungary. We have a strong political dialogue. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met Foreign Minister Janos Martonyi on 29 February. I have just hosted Zsolt Nemeth, the Deputy Foreign Minister, during a UK visit. I also met the Hungarian Speaker, Janos Ader, during the recent Inter-Parliamentary Union visit.

British Trade International's Opportunity Hungary campaign is encouraging more UK trade and investment in Hungary. We are supporting Hungary's accession to the EU through technical and financial assistance.

Mr. Marsden: Having recently met, as co-chairman of the Future of Europe trust, an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation from Hungary, I was left in no doubt, first, of Hungary's keenness to join the European Union; and, secondly, of the business opportunities in that country for companies such as PowerGen, British Aerospace and Tesco. Does my hon. Friend believe that Hungary's early accession to the European Union would create a beacon of stability for south-east Europe? Does he also agree that any tampering with current European treaties, as Conservative Members advocate doing, would dangerously jeopardise the enlargement that we all should like to see?

Mr. Vaz: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the excellent work that he does as co-chairman of the Future of Europe Trust. He is absolutely right that it is essential that Hungary should be encouraged in its European Union membership application. Last year, bilateral trade with Hungary was worth £1 billion, and British companies invested $1 billion in Hungary. He is also right to say that the accession procedures are going well. Only yesterday, I spoke to Commissioner Verheugen in Luxembourg, and he assured me that of the 31 chapters of the various acquis that are necessary for the negotiations to be completed, 21 chapters have been opened and 10 have been closed. Progress is therefore going well. We must just ensure that we are ready for enlargement by completing the intergovernmental conference this year.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Is the Minister aware of reports, last week, in *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, that Hungary and Poland had been rebuked by the French

President and the German Foreign Minister for expressing concerns about the European security and defence identity? President Chirac is reported to have asked Mr. Geremek, Poland's Foreign Minister,

whether Poland wished to be America's 51st state,

and Mr. Fischer lectured him about the imperatives of being a "good European". The article goes on to state:

Implicit in these admonitions has been the threat that the West Europeans will stall the easterners' applications for membership in the European Union.

Will the Minister now dissociate Britain from any such threats and make it unequivocally clear that countries such as Hungary and Poland which have applied to join the European Union should not be intimidated into acquiescing in European federalist developments that they dislike?

Mr. Vaz: I do not know which part of the internet the right hon. Gentleman has been looking at, but there is clearly something wrong with his software. There is no question but that Hungary and Poland—two NATO members—fully support the common security and defence policy of the United Kingdom and of the European Union. That was the message that was given to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary when their representatives met him a few weeks ago, and that is the message that I received only last week from all the Visegrad Foreign Ministers. When they came to see me, they were extremely relaxed about the matter. They want a policy that will provide for the peace, stability and security of Europe. They want to be part of that.

Mr. Maude: How does the Minister explain consistent reports that those countries are expressing real concerns about the European defence initiative not including current members of the European Union? Does he not understand that, although those countries certainly want to join the European Union, many of them have serious reservations about the slide towards a European super-state? Why does not the Foreign Secretary now exercise some leadership in Europe and start making the case for the candidate countries to be able to join the European Union without having to sign up to every aspect of the acquis? Does not the growing size of the European Union mean that the old "one size fits all" model is simply out of date?

Mr. Vaz: I feel very sad for the right hon. Gentleman that he has to rely on second-hand information. The Foreign Secretary and I have first-hand information because we have actually met the Foreign Ministers concerned. We have had those discussions with them. They fully support our defence policy. They want to be part of the European Union, and, as members of NATO, they very much want to be part of the defence policy of Europe. I would rather take their word for it than his.

Belize-Guatemala Border Dispute

7. **Maria Eagle** (Liverpool, Garston): If he will make a statement on the on-going border dispute between Belize and Guatemala; and what steps the Government are taking to resolve it. [117171]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): There is an on-going border dispute between Guatemala and Belize. Recently, the tension increased with the abduction, on 24 February, of three members of the Belize defence force and a policeman. All four were released and although tensions have remained, constructive discussions have now taken place in the presence of the Secretary General of the Organisation of American States, and further talks are planned.

Maria Eagle: Does my hon. Friend agree that what central America needs more than anything at the moment is a period of stability? Is not an essential part of that encouraging the move to democracy in Guatemala? Will he assure the House that any intervention that he makes to assist in resolving this dispute will bear those two facts in mind?

Mr. Battle: Yes; both I and my noble Friend Baroness Scotland have spoken to the Governments of Guatemala and Belize about the need to reduce tensions and to have serious negotiations. I agree with my hon. Friend that human rights in Guatemala are important, as is its movement to democracy. The context in which the conversations take place should be amicable, and negotiations must not move down the route of violence and the hijacking of personnel.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Does not the United Kingdom have a continued interest in that part of central America, inasmuch as Belize is a fellow Commonwealth country and a territory where the British armed forces have jungle training facilities, as well as staging rights? Since Guatemala has made welcome progress towards democracy and has ended its civil war, should not it now engage in the talks for which a direct agenda has been outlined?

Mr. Battle: The answer generally is yes. I want to emphasise that the United Kingdom has no legal responsibilities in relation to Guatemala's border dispute with Belize, which goes back to 1859. However, we are ready to give diplomatic assistance to both sides to bring about a peaceful solution. That is our role, and we will continue to work towards it.

Manufacturing

8. **Mr. Jeff Ennis** (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): What recent meetings he has had with the German Foreign Minister to discuss manufacturing industry. [117174]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the subject with the German Foreign Minister at the General Affairs Council meeting in Luxembourg yesterday.

Mr. Ennis: Does my hon. Friend agree that Vodafone's recent takeover of Mannesmann shows that British companies can compete in Germany? Does he further

agree that in order for British companies to compete in the future, Britain must maintain its central role within the European Union?

Mr. Vaz: I agree with my hon. Friend. Bilateral trade with Germany last year was worth £49 billion, and 700,000 British companies invest and create jobs in Europe. It is extremely important that we keep that relationship going.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): When the Foreign Secretary met his German counterpart, did they discuss the problems that Germany and, to an extent, this country are encountering with manufacturing costs? Is he aware that, for the first time in recent years, Germany has started to export its manufacturing capacity to other parts of the world—not least the far east—because of the heavy social and other costs involved with manufacturing within the EU, and within Germany in particular? Until recently, we have had some advantage—but we are giving it away.

Mr. Vaz: I do not know whether that exact point was discussed by my right hon. Friend, but I know of the hon. Gentleman's great interest in this matter as chairman of the manufacturing group in this House. Our relationship with Germany is a good commercial one, based on the creation of jobs in both countries. We want to make sure that German firms are able to succeed in this country, and that our firms succeed in Germany. That is what being part of the EU is all about—a market of 390 million people; soon, we hope, to be enlarged by a further 120 million to create the largest single market in the world. We want the climate and conditions for our manufacturing industry to survive and prosper.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that the anger and opposition felt by so many people in this country at BMW's decision to break up the Rover Group is directed against BMW as a pan-European company, rather than against German industry or the German people as a whole? Does he agree that German companies—including those that located to Britain in support of BMW's presence here—and Rover dealers in Germany stand to lose out as well? Will he ask his counterpart in the German Foreign Ministry to join us in asking BMW to consider seriously all credible alternative bids for Rover, so that German and British industry can thrive?

Mr. Vaz: I congratulate my hon. Friend on what he has done as a west midlands Member of Parliament in promoting the need for jobs in the area following what has happened. I assure him that the Government have put their faith in the taskforce, to which £129 million has been allocated. BMW is working with Alchemy and the British Government, particularly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, to ensure the best possible outcome. We shall do everything that we can to help that process. The record of past taskforces is good. Within nine months of the 1998 Fujitsu closure, when 580 jobs were lost, 97 per cent. of the work force were in employment again. I assure my hon. Friend that we shall do all that we can to help the process.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): In his foreword to the Department's annual report, the Foreign Secretary places great stress on the role to be played by his Department in what he refers to as a "joined-up organisation", with the Department of Trade and Industry to promote trade and investment. What effect does he think that it has on the efforts of those trying to attract inward investment when they read reports of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Defence calling the management of BMW liars? Does he think that helps?

Mr. Vaz: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, my right hon. Friends did not say that. He will also know that we were disappointed by BMW's decision, because a commitment was made to the company. Rather than making cheap political points, the right hon. Gentleman should work positively to ensure that those who have lost or may lose their jobs are put back in employment.

Iraq

9. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): When he next intends to visit the Gulf states to discuss the future of Iraq. [117175]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We have regular dialogue with countries in the region on Iraq. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain were all helpful in securing agreement in the Security Council to resolution 1284, drafted by the United Kingdom. Every country in the Gulf supports the implementation of that resolution, which unilaterally removes any ceiling on oil exports by Iraq and offers the suspension of sanctions in return for progress on disarmament of weapons of mass destruction. I regret that Iraq has yet to say whether it will take up that prospect of an end to sanctions.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: In so far as the United Nations has miserably failed to enforce its own resolutions and not stopped sanction busting by Saddam Hussein, enabling him to raise the money to fund his illegal regime, could we not consider a change in policy away from the enforcement of sanctions, which some of us have supported through thick and thin for nearly 10 years, towards a policy of indicting Saddam Hussein in the international court for war crimes, murder, genocide and crimes against humanity? Should not that be the new approach?

Mr. Cook: No international court would be competent to pursue those charges. We could pursue them only through a United Nations Security Council resolution to establish a special tribunal on Iraq. As I have said before, I see no realistic prospect of our obtaining agreement to such a resolution. Because of that, Britain was in the lead in supporting the formation of an International Criminal Court, which would have prosecutors who could decide for themselves who should be brought before the court, and which would end the arrangement by which special UN clearance was needed for anybody to be indicted. Once we have such a court, the way will be clear to proceed against dictators such as Saddam in the way my hon. Friend wishes.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): In the meantime, as the right hon. Gentleman is aware, there has been a sharp increase in the smuggling of oil by Iraq. What practical steps are being taken to stop that?

Mr. Cook: The United States and United Kingdom navies operate in the Gulf and have carried out some successful operations, including one recently against oil smuggling. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There is no reason to smuggle oil out of Iraq. As a result of the recent resolution, Saddam can legitimately export all the oil that he wants. The only reason he chooses to smuggle some of it is that he does not want to be held to account for the money that he receives for that oil. He does not want to put it towards children's food, hospitals and medicines for his people. He wants to use it to support his military. That is the only reason for the smuggling.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, while we can and must target sanctions more effectively—I hope that he will have recourse to the report by the International Development Committee on that subject—the fact remains that it is Saddam Hussein himself who bears responsibility for the plight of the Iraqi people? If he wished to take up the opportunity to exchange oil for supplies and humanitarian relief, he could.

Mr. Cook: At present, Iraq is exporting a volume of oil roughly equivalent to the volume exported by Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. It has just been announced that Iraq will increase its production by another 700,000 barrels a day, which will bring its exports above those of Iran. Potentially, $10 billion is available for humanitarian purposes in Iraq. In those circumstances, I find it hard to understand why people in Iraq are going hungry and are short of medicines. The only reason for that is the priorities of Saddam Hussein, not the sanctions.

Montenegro

10. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What assessment he has made of the political situation in Montenegro. [117176]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): We continue to support the democratically elected Government of President Djukanovic, and are keen to see the democratic and economic reforms already under way in Montenegro expanded and developed. We strongly condemn the economic measures taken against Montenegro by Milosevic, including an embargo on food and medicines. I discussed the current situation with the Montenegrin Foreign Minister, Branko Lukovac, at the stability pact conference last month.

Mr. Heath: Does the Minister agree that it is desperately important to underpin the democratic aspirations in Montenegro? When will the stability pact for south-east Europe deliver for Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania and the other states in the region? Do the serious criticisms expressed in the German press, the Bundestag and the European Parliament give him any cause for concern about, or any lack of confidence in, Mr. Bodo Hombach, the co-ordinator of the stability pact?

Mr. Vaz: I know of the hon. Gentleman's interest in those matters as the chairman of the all-party group on Kosovo. Yesterday, at the Luxembourg General Affairs Council meeting, we heard a very good report from Javier Solana and Chris Patten about the work that they have undertaken following the successful conclusions at Lisbon, where it was decided that there needed to be a much more proactive role in trying to deal with the situation in Montenegro. The hon. Gentleman, more than anyone else in the House, knows how difficult the situation is, but we need to support the Government of Montenegro and ensure that they have the capacity and the confidence to deal with the very difficult situation they are in. Montenegro has had 82.7 million euro given to it in the past two years. We want to ensure that Solana and Patten can work with Bodo Hombach—who has done an excellent job in difficult circumstances—to deliver a practical result for the people of Montenegro.

Iran

11. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on human rights in Iran. [117177]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Although there have been improvements in Iran's human rights record since the election of President Khatami in 1997, we continue to press his Government over continued persecution of the Baha'i religious minority, the lack of transparency in Iran's judicial proceedings and the trial of members of the Iranian Jewish community.

Mr. Dismore: I remind my hon. Friend that the 13 Jews who were detained in Iran more than a year ago face the start of their trial on Thursday. I urge him to use all possible endeavours to put pressure on the Iranian Government to ensure that they receive a fair trial, with adequate legal representation and international observers, so that we can bring that travesty to an end and ensure the detainees' release from those dubious, bogus and trumped-up charges.

Mr. Hain: I know of my hon. Friend's close interest in that trial, and I applaud him for it. It is an interest that the British Government—including my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and myself as the Minister responsible—have consistently raised with the Iranian Government. There has been some good news: it is not clear that the trial will start this week. The judicial spokesman has said that the defendants, who do not have representation, will now have time to appoint lawyers, which is good. He has also announced that proceedings will be open to the media and media representatives, which is also good news. It is also clear that only a few of those involved will be charged with espionage and the others will face lesser offences, thus removing the prospect of the death penalty. I hope that the Iranian authorities will take account of the enormous concern across the world about the trial and act accordingly.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): While I welcome that question and the Minister's response to it, does the

Minister agree that all matters pertaining to middle east issues are of the greatest sensitivity? Does he agree also that someone who will be taking an increasing role in these matters is the Government's so-called special envoy, Lord Levy? In the circumstances, will the Minister confirm to the House that there is no question of Lord Levy's having been in contact with any foreign intelligence agencies?

Mr. Hain: The hon. Gentleman started off very well, and I applaud him for that. He shares our concern and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) about the plight of the Jewish detainees in Iran, an issue that we shall continue to address.

As I said during the previous Foreign and Commonwealth Question Time, Lord Levy plays an important role as the personal envoy of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. He is highly respected throughout the middle east. He meets presidents, kings, foreign ministers and others to promote the peace process. His role should be applauded and not continually sniped at. The hon. Gentleman should think of a better ending to his question next time.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will my hon. Friend confirm that although there remain considerable causes for concern about the human rights record within Iran, reports of reputable human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International show that there has been a slight improvement, and do not bear out the more lurid allegations that were rehearsed at the beginning of the sitting by, for example, the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess)? The important matter in Iran, with the election of the new, reform-minded Government, is for countries such as the United Kingdom to work constructively with the new regime to try to help Iran to make the transition towards a modern Government who can play a positive role within the region?

Mr. Hain: That question was a breath of fresh air and common sense after the previous one. My hon. Friend makes the important point that, under President Khatami and his reforming Government, there has been considerable progress on human rights and in other respects. The recent clear mandate that he received for reforms in the elections in Iran has given him the opportunity to work with the international community—Britain included, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will travel to Tehran shortly. That will ensure that Iran is brought back into that community on a basis of friendship with other nations, rather than on one of hostility, as in the past. We need a process of critical but active engagement to assist that reform process, which is precisely what we are doing.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Certainly, we must express concern for the 13 members of the Jewish community who are detainees, but is it not correct that Muslims are experiencing similar charges? If that is the case, is it not wrong to concentrate only on people of one religion? Should we not express concern for both Jews and Muslims? Does the Minister agree that there has been a substantial advance in human rights in Iran over the past five years?

Mr. Hain: Yes, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there has been a substantial advance in human rights in Iran. There is, however, a long way to go. I can confirm that Muslims are charged under the same procedure in the same trial, and we are equally concerned for their human rights. Given the sensitivities in the middle east, I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will understand why there is particular concern for the detainees who are of Jewish descent and who have been prosecuted.

BBC World Service

12. **Mr. David Chidgey** (Eastleigh): What assessment he has made of the impact of the World Service's internet site on the target audience. [117178]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We support the World Service's aspirations to be a major internet player and I am delighted that in December there were more than 20 million page impressions and audio listeners monthly. The BBC World Service is now the most listened-to audio news online in the world.

Mr. Chidgey: I am pleased to hear the Minister echo those sentiments. I am sure that he agrees that it is a tremendous success story for the BBC. Does he agree also that it is an opportunity for Britain to become the most successful and the best provider in the world of news services on the internet? Bearing in mind how BBC television lost out to CNN as a provider of world television news services, what plans does the hon. Gentleman have to ensure that the BBC on the internet will grasp the opportunities for Britain that are now presented to it?

Mr. Hain: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I agree with him. We are working with BBC World Service to help and encourage it to spread its online provision, which is the most listened-to online information service in the world. As was noted earlier, it is spreading into other languages. The BBC deserves praise for taking the lead in its commitment to expand and to use the full potential of the internet. We also support BBC World's activities to provide increased television coverage across the world for the BBC. There are 7 million listeners to BBC World, which is available in 500,000 hotels and other places. We welcome that as well.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does the Minister agree that the BBC World Service is respected throughout the world as an independent and authoritative source of news, especially for people living under repressive regimes? The number of people accessing BBC online services increased by 218 per cent. last year, but my real interest is in the repressive regimes—[HON. MEMBERS: "Rephrase."] I shall press the rewind button, Madam Speaker. It is vital that the message gets through to people living under repressive regimes, and it is therefore absolutely necessary that parallel-portal services are made available throughout the world, so that people living under

repressive regimes can more easily access BBC online services. What talks has the Minister had with the BBC to ensure that the extra parallel-portal services are made available, so that the people who most need an independent source of news can get it?

Mr. Hain: I thought for a moment that the hon. Gentleman was making a bid for a Front-Bench job. However, I agree with the important point that he raises. We are in close touch with BBC management to encourage them to go down that route. It is very important that every opportunity is taken to expand the BBC's services in the fast-moving world of modern information technology. The BBC is the voice of freedom across the world. That is especially important for people living under the repressive regimes in which the hon. Gentleman is now taking a close interest.

Poland

13. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): What assessment he has made of the current state of relations between the UK and Poland; and if he will make a statement. [117179]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): Our relations with Poland are excellent. We maintain a strong political dialogue, and Poland is one of our most important trading partners in central and eastern Europe. We warmly welcomed Poland's membership of NATO in March 1999, and we continue actively to support Poland's application to join the European Union. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Minister met Poland's Foreign Minister Geremek in February. The weekend before last, in London, I met the Polish Minister for European Affairs, Andrzei Ananicz.

Mrs. Gilroy: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. He will no doubt be pleased but not surprised to learn that, on my visit to Poland in January—when I went to the Deblin Royal Air Force academy and later had the pleasure of attending the RAF ball in Warsaw—there was no sign whatever of the attitude alluded to earlier by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude).

However, does my hon. Friend recollect Poland's chief negotiator saying that the last thing Europe needs is a pick-and-choose community? Is not it clear that the applicant countries want to join the European Union because of what the EU has achieved and because of its aspirations? Is not it equally clear that those countries will have little time for any British Government who seek to undermine those achievements?

Mr. Vaz: I am glad that my hon. Friend was able to visit Poland in January. My first visit as Minister for Europe was to Poland, although no one invited me to the ball—perhaps my shoes did not fit.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that Poland wants to be a first-class country in the European Union. We do not favour a two-tier EU. That is why we fully support Poland's ambition to join the EU. It is making excellent progress. When I spoke to Mr. Ananicz a fortnight ago, he said that the negotiations were going well. Of course, the most important element for Poland, the chapter on agriculture, has not yet been opened. Poland has ambitious targets to join and we have made it clear that we shall support it. We support 10 twinning arrangements in Poland, and we also provide funds through the know-how fund, which we shall continue to do.

The twinning arrangement between Gdynia and my hon. Friend's constituency is very important. We would like to see such arrangements extended to other constituencies and cities in the United Kingdom.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Minister share my concern that Poland will be on target to join the EU by 2004? He referred to extra work being needed in terms of agricultural reforms, and I draw his attention to the fact that law and environmental protection need further work. How much technical assistance are the Government prepared to provide to help Poland achieve its target date?

Mr. Vaz: As the hon. Lady knows, Poland has set its own target date. That cannot be achieved until the intergovernmental conference is completed by the end of this year and is ratified in the various national Parliaments. We do not want to discourage Poland; we want to encourage it. It is important that the applicant countries know that they have the support of countries such as the United Kingdom.

When I was in Poland, we launched a number of schemes. We have extended our twinning programme and, as I have said, the know-how fund provides assistance. I have said to Foreign Minister Ananicz, and my right hon. Friend has said to Foreign Minister Geremek, that if we can help in any way, we will stand ready to help. We want Poland to be part of an enlarged Europe. It will give us a single market of 500 million people. Poland is already a member of NATO, and we want it in the European Union. We are Poland's best friend in Europe.

Brazil

14. **Mr. Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): What steps he has taken to encourage Brazil to sign international labour convention 169. [117180]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): Ratification of the International Labour Organisation's convention 169, which refers to the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, is one of the short-term objectives outlined in the Brazilian Government's national human rights plan, which we strongly support. The convention is currently with the Brazilian Congress for ratification.

Mr. Goggins: May I thank my hon. Friend for that positive reply? He may be aware that 22 April marks the 500th anniversary of the arrival in Brazil of the first Europeans. Given the terrible impact that colonisation has had on its indigenous people, does my hon. Friend agree that now would be a very good time for Brazil to sign ILO convention 169, which enshrines the rights of indigenous peoples to have control over their own lives and livelihoods? Will he urge the Brazilian Government to mark this significant anniversary by taking the important step of ratifying the convention?

Mr. Battle: My hon. Friend has an active and deep interest in Latin American affairs. The answer to his

question is yes. We regularly raise indigenous issues with the Brazilian authorities, and we hope that ratification can be achieved. We have raised the matter within the United Nations in the working group on the draft directive on the rights of indigenous people. At the recent sessions of the UN General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights, we have regularly raised these matters with the Brazilian authorities and non-governmental organisations.

We support the projects to support indigenous peoples in Brazil. We welcome the Brazilian Government's progress in demarcating Indian lands, and we shall keep up the pressure. However, my hon. Friend makes a useful suggestion: the anniversary would be an excellent opportunity for ratification, and we would welcome the Brazilian Government taking it.

Balkans

15. **Mr. David Tredinnick** (Bosworth): What progress is being made in co–ordinating the international effort in the Balkans; and if he will make a statement. [117181]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): I am happy to report three recent examples of progress. First, the European Council in Lisbon agreed that the international community needed a more coherent strategy to support Kosovo and the region. Secondly, on 28 March, the Contact Group, bringing together Russia and the leading NATO allies, met for the first time in more than a year. Thirdly, on 29 March the regional financing conference of the stability pact pledged more than 2.4 billion euro for reconstruction projects in the region. The United Kingdom has pledged to contribute £100 million in bilateral technical assistance over the next three years.

Mr. Tredinnick: I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he not think that some lessons can be learned following the recent attack on Polish and United States troops in southern Kosovo, and that since co-operation has been resumed with KFOR, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office should look seriously at the matter.

Is the Minister aware that at a Future of Europe Trust meeting this week in the House, representatives expressed great concern about the way in which the federal aviation authority was stopping flights into Montenegro? Will he look into that matter?

Mr. Vaz: I was not aware of what the Future of Europe Trust discussed this week, but I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleague to discuss the matter, as I have done in the past. The circumstances are difficult. KFOR, the United Nations mission in Kosovo, and all the other groups that are in the region as a result of UN resolution 1244, are there to try to rebuild Kosovo and the region. We should do our best to help that process. These are difficult and sensitive issues. The forces out there are working as well as they can. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to take this discussion forward.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): My hon. Friend will be aware that the announcement of the stability pact was greeted with considerable enthusiasm by all countries in south-eastern Europe, but is he aware that some disquiet is now coming into that process as a result of the slow pace of delivery? Can he guarantee that the British Government will be at the forefront of saying that now is the time to act; that the rhetoric is excellent and the will is there, but that we need to see action on the ground to build democracy and an economic pathway for the Balkans into the mainstream of the European family?

Mr. Vaz: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work that he did when he had ministerial responsibility for the Balkans at the Foreign Office. He gave enormous leadership to the process. The decision taken at Lisbon was important. The involvement of Javier Solana and Chris Patten, working with Bodo Hombach from the stability pact, will ensure much quicker delivery. We know that progress takes a long time and we realise that people are frustrated at the time that it takes. We are frustrated but, as my hon. Friend more than anyone else in the House knows, these are difficult circumstances. I hope that, with the new impetus given by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary at Lisbon, the process will be quickened.

Visa Applicants (Sub-continent)

18. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What arrangements he is making to assist visa applicants at British high commissions in Dhaka, Islamabad and New Delhi. [117184]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The number of permanent entry clearance staff at Islamabad and Dhaka has been increased within the last year. All three posts receive additional temporary staff during the busy season. I have put in hand feasibility studies at each post to consider further how services to visa applicants can be improved. Decisions will be made before the summer recess.

Dr. Iddon: Is my hon. Friend aware that the British Bengali community is funding an Immigration Advisory Service office in Sylhet to put applications in order before they are submitted to the entry clearance post in Dhaka? Will he consider funding such charitable offices not only in Sylhet but in Islamabad and New Delhi, as the Foreign Affairs Committee has recommended?

Mr. Vaz: I am aware of what the Immigration Advisory Service proposes to do and, indeed, has started to do. We welcome the involvement of agencies in a complicated and difficult area of law. As my hon. Friend may know, I went to Sylhet to see the operation there a few weeks ago. I am confident that when the feasibility studies have reported, we shall consider how we can improve the facilities in New Delhi, Dhaka, Sylhet and Bombay. On his forthcoming trip to the sub-continent, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will look at the visa facilities. I cannot promise funds for the IAS, because it does not come within the remit of the Foreign Office, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will write to the Home Secretary expressing his view.

USA National Missile Defence Project

19. **Mr. Eric Illsley** (Barnsley, Central): If he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards the USA national missile defence project. [117185]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The United States Administration has not yet decided to proceed with the deployment of a national missile defence system. Nor will they do so before later this summer at the earliest.

We have welcomed repeated US assurances that they will take a number of factors into account before making any such decision, including its possible impact on strategic stability and on international arms control.

We continue to urge both the US Administration and the Russian Government to seek an agreed way forward on this issue. We have made it clear to both sides that we wish to see the anti-ballistic missile treaty preserved and further early progress made in reducing the nuclear arsenals of each country.

Mr. Illsley: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. During its visit to the United States three weeks ago, the Foreign Affairs Committee was left in no doubt that the American Government, their advisers and American politicians are wholly convinced of the missile threat from North Korea and of the possibility of such a threat from Iran—hence the talk about upgrading Fylingdales. Does my hon. Friend agree that the key to this issue is agreement with Russia and the United States? Have the British Government held any discussions with the new Russian Administration? If so, are further discussions planned?

Mr. Vaz: I assure my hon. Friend that, when discussions take place between the Prime Minister and Mr. Putin, those issues will be raised—as they have been raised in the past at meetings between my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and Mr. Ivanov. I agree with my hon. Friend that we should continue along the lines that he suggests; I look forward to reading the Select Committee's report.

Zimbabwe

4. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): What representations he has received on the rule of law in Zimbabwe; and if he will make a statement. [117168]

5. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): If he will make a statement on the future of the United Kingdom's relations with Zimbabwe. [117169]

16. **Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith** (Wealden): If he will make a statement on the political situation in Zimbabwe. [117182]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): My colleague, the Minister of State—my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain)—and I have repeatedly expressed our concerns at the deterioration in the economy and stability of Zimbabwe. I met President Mugabe last week in the margins of the European Union-Africa summit. I am grateful to President Obasanjo of Nigeria for helping to arrange the meeting and for having played such a positive part in it.

I emphasised our deep concern at the present situation in Zimbabwe; in particular, at the failure of the Zimbabwean police and the Government of Zimbabwe to uphold the rule of law, by complying with the court order to clear the illegal occupation of farms, or by protecting the right of citizens to peaceful demonstration without fear of violence. I also stressed the importance that we attach to free and fair elections within the time frame set out in the constitution of Zimbabwe. President Mugabe assured President Obasanjo and me that he intended to hold elections in May. He also agreed to send a delegation to London to discuss all our concerns.

Yesterday, I opened the discussion among European Foreign Ministers on Zimbabwe. I am pleased to report that 11 countries spoke strongly in support of our concerns and that we unanimously agreed conclusions demanding respect for the rule of law and urging free and fair elections. We agreed that the EU should provide monitors to observe that the conditions for elections are free and fair.

This morning, I spoke to Don McKinnon, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. I gave notice that I will want to raise our concerns about Zimbabwe at the forthcoming meeting of the Commonwealth ministerial action group.

I agree with Lord Carrington's statement this morning that we must put as much international pressure as possible on the Government of Zimbabwe. That is what we are doing. However, the solutions to the problems of Zimbabwe must be found in Zimbabwe itself. I spoke this morning to Mr. Kenwood, president of the Farmers Union, who stressed that he and his members were citizens of Zimbabwe and wanted to seek a solution in a cool and level-headed manner.

I very much regret that President Mugabe has not approached our dialogue in that same spirit. Indeed, he has repeatedly tried to turn the election into a confrontation between Zimbabwe and Britain.

I have therefore sought in all my statements to demonstrate that Britain is not an enemy, but a friend of the people of Zimbabwe. It is because of that friendship that Britain is leading the international demand that the Government of Zimbabwe respect the rule of law and that the people of Zimbabwe must have the right, through free and fair elections, to decide for themselves who will govern Zimbabwe. We will continue to take every responsible and reasonable step to secure those twin demands.

Mr. Gray: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that statement and for his commitment to cool reason. None the less, if he agrees that what President Mugabe is doing in Zimbabwe looks very much like ethnic cleansing, although, in this case, it is directed against many British passport holders, when does he intend to replace the rhetoric and the discussions that he described with some real action? For example, will he consider freezing President Mugabe's international assets? Will he speak more directly to the Commonwealth about the possibility

of suspending Zimbabwe? If he will not take either of those actions, when does he intend to do something to which Zimbabwe will really listen?

Mr. Cook: We are taking every reasonable and responsible step. The hon. Gentleman asks whether we will consider freezing the assets of President Mugabe. I can predict the reaction if we were to confiscate his assets; he would then confiscate farms in Zimbabwe. One farmer to whom I spoke today said:

> We are the ones who get beaten over the head here, whenever he gets beaten over the head there.

If we want to provoke such retaliation, that is certainly how we would go about it. I appeal to the hon. Gentleman: if those on the ground want to proceed with the matter in a cool and level-headed manner, the least that we can do is to try to make sure that we do the same in this House.

Mr. Winterton: The right hon. Gentleman will know that my interest in Zimbabwe goes back 30 years. We both believe that it holds perhaps the greatest potential of any country in central southern Africa. Would he emphasise to the House that we have no argument whatever with the good people of Zimbabwe and that we want to play our part through aid to ensure that they do not suffer through the mismanagement and wickedness of their Government? Will he assure us that aid will continue to flow to Zimbabwe, but that it will go through non-governmental organisations and direct to projects that will help the people of that long-suffering country?

Mr. Cook: I echo the hon. Gentleman's remarks. It is important that the message goes out from this House that we want the people of Zimbabwe to succeed. The real tragedy of that country is that it is potentially one of the richest and wealthiest in the region, but that its economy has now been reduced to the extent that it has 60 per cent. inflation and no foreign exchange reserves. I very much hope that the people of Zimbabwe will soon, as a result of the pressure on its Government, have the opportunity to take control of their own government through free and fair elections.

On aid, we have for some time restricted any new aid to the Government of Zimbabwe. We are looking for ways in which we can channel it through non-governmental organisations and now a quarter of all our aid to Zimbabwe goes through NGOs. However, the NGO sector in Zimbabwe is still weak and it is not easy to replicate entirely all the aid that we provide through its Government.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: The right hon. Gentleman will be very much aware that not just this but other countries have played an enormous part in helping to revive the agrarian economy of what was Rhodesia. In fact, just two years ago, 700 farms in good areas were available for black people to farm the land. Does he agree that the time has come to put more pressure on the Government of Zimbabwe and that we should not rely just on the countries of the European Union to do that? Would it be more successful if we included countries of the Commonwealth in the representations that we make? After all, Zimbabwe is still a part of the Commonwealth.

Mr. Cook: As I said earlier, I will raise this matter at the Commonwealth ministerial action group when it meets in two weeks' time. I have already discussed the issue with a number of other Commonwealth leaders and I particularly welcome the help that President Obasanjo gave us in Cairo. Indeed, the assurance that elections will be held in May was given to him and not just to Britain. Therefore, I expect him to support us and to make sure that we proceed on that point.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman's comments about farms. Some 100 farms held by the Government of Zimbabwe are not being allocated to anybody, and they are going to waste. Over the past three years, half the farms that have been allocated under the land reform scheme run by the Government of Zimbabwe have gone not to the rural poor, but to members of the Government and officials employed by the Government. They have tended to get leases at half the rents paid by others who received farms. In those circumstances, although we are willing to fund a programme of land reform, it must be a programme targeted at the rural poor and not an urban elite.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The holding of free and fair elections is vital. Has there been any indication from the Government of Zimbabwe that they will be prepared to accept Commonwealth observers or monitors at those elections? Would my right hon. Friend confirm, along with the Commonwealth Secretary-General, that the only precedents for suspension from the Commonwealth have been when there has been a military coup in a Commonwealth country? Does he see any further scope for a role for an intermediary from a Commonwealth country, such as President Obasanjo or President Mbeki, because the vital interests of South Africa and the region as a whole could be threatened if there is a crisis of confidence among the white people of that area?

Mr. Cook: Many of the countries in the region are conscious that the decay of Zimbabwe's economy is of legitimate concern to them, and it is important that we explore every possible opportunity of working with them to find a resolution. My hon. Friend refers to precedents for suspension; there is only one and that is the case of Nigeria under its military regime. Nevertheless the Commonwealth ministerial action group has been gradually pressing for a widening of the scope of its action, and I expect support for us discussing that when we meet next month.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Should not the whole vexed question of land in that country be properly dealt with through the rule of law and negotiations? Is it not unfortunate that Mugabe and his cronies and thugs are using racism and xenophobia to whip up a situation so that Mugabe can hang on to power, because it seems to me that that is certainly the main motive in the present situation? Should not racism and xenophobia be

denounced everywhere, whether it is in the country that we are now discussing or nearer home, as we witnessed yesterday with questions about asylum seekers?

Mr. Cook: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that racism has no place to play either in Zimbabwe's politics or in Britain's politics. One point that has repeatedly been stressed by the farmers whose lands are occupied is that they are not white British farmers but citizens of Zimbabwe. They are entitled to protection under the rule of law in Zimbabwe, and if any citizen of that country loses the right of the protection of the courts and the rule of law, all citizens of Zimbabwe have their rights put at risk.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will my right hon. Friend convey to the high commissioner for Zimbabwe in London the fact that many of us who took to the streets in the 1960s and 1970s to end colonial rule in Rhodesia, and against Mr. Smith, and who supported the black liberation movements, are deeply saddened by what is happening today, indeed, even embarrassed?

Mr. Cook: I hope that what my hon. Friend has said in the Chamber will be heard, and we will certainly make sure that it is drawn to the attention of Zimbabwe's representative in Britain. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it is important that we make sure that the people of Zimbabwe have the rights and democracy that many of us wanted them to have after independence. I have been accused in one or two quarters of having a colonial attitude in lecturing Zimbabwe on rights and democracy for its people. I totally reject the idea that that is a colonial attitude. We would have a colonial attitude if we were failing to insist on the same rights and democracy for the people of Zimbabwe that we insist on for ourselves.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): The whole House will want to send a message to the people of Zimbabwe, which should be one of Africa's most prosperous and stable nations, that we are their friend, and that Britain stands by its friends when they are in trouble. They are in trouble because of the regime: the wholesale intimidation of journalists and anyone with dissident views; the way in which the Government are cynically encouraging thugs to invade property despite the Government failing to win the recent referendum; the continued prosecution of a pointless and costly war in the Congo; and the postponement of the elections. All that is condemning Zimbabwe to penury and oppression. It is a process that now has all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing.

Everyone in Zimbabwe that I know of agrees that land reform is needed, but, so far, the 1 million or so acres that have been acquired by the Government over the 20 years since independence have been given not to the dispossessed but to Mugabe's cronies. Apart from our concerns for Zimbabwe itself, the House must be aware that, on the Foreign Office's own assessment, around 50,000 Zimbabweans either have, or are entitled to, British passports and are therefore entitled to enter Britain, so this country cannot stand idly by.

Will the Foreign Secretary tell the House why bilateral aid to Zimbabwe's Government is now increasing and Britain is still providing Zimbabwe with military assistance, as shown in the recent reply by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain)? Why is nothing being done, as far as we know, to investigate the possibility of freezing the overseas assets of Mr. Mugabe and his cronies? Those would be sanctions directed against the regime, and not the people. Why did the EU yesterday decide to continue to provide aid to the Government of Zimbabwe? Has the Foreign Secretary agreed to meet Morgan Tsvangirai, the Opposition leader, later this week when he is in Britain, as I plan to do?

Why has it taken so long for the Foreign Secretary to get around to involving the Commonwealth? Should not that family of nations be the main vehicle for international pressure, threatening suspension if Zimbabwe fails to return to the rule of law? Why should attempts not be made now to get the recent Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, or another respected African leader, to take the lead in putting pressure on the Mugabe regime to change?

Is it any wonder that Mark Chavunduka—one of Zimbabwe's leading newspaper editors, who was tortured by the Mugabe regime last January—said, when I met him last week:

> I was disappointed when I heard the statement by Robin Cook—basically, it was a bit wishy-washy. I would go for a far tougher course of action . . . ?

Last week, the Foreign Secretary had the chance to make crystal clear to Mr. Mugabe the abhorrence felt throughout the Commonwealth at his Government's behaviour. Does he understand how mortified and angry British people are when, instead of winning any concessions from Mr. Mugabe, the Foreign Secretary limply promises to muzzle his own criticisms?

There is a serious crisis in which Britain has a direct interest. Crises call for statesmanship. The Foreign Secretary does not even get close.

Mr. Cook: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his exercise in burning the midnight oil rather than listening to exchanges in the Chamber. I am grateful to him for agreeing with—indeed repeating—many of my points.

I am happy to confirm that, like the right hon. Gentleman, I shall meet Mr. Tsvangirai. I suspect that he is looking forward rather more to a useful discussion with the Government than to one with the Opposition of the sort that we have just heard. As for why I am raising the issue only at the next meeting of the Commonwealth ministerial action group, I cannot do it any earlier than when the next meeting happens to be. I have already told the Secretary-General that it will be on the agenda on that occasion—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman has asked me a number of questions and he is entitled to hear the answer.

On the question of military training, the training provided is not to the Government or the army of Zimbabwe, but to the whole of the southern region of Africa, and it is training in peacekeeping intervention by the Organisation of African Unity or the United Nations. The group is based in Zimbabwe, but provides services across the whole of the region and to the other countries in the region. I can think of no better way of losing us influence with neighbouring countries of the region whose support we now need than withdrawing that facility.

The right hon. Gentleman suggests that we should withdraw aid to Zimbabwe, but which aid would he have us withdraw? Does he want us to withdraw the aid that we are providing to combat HIV, when a quarter of the population of Zimbabwe suffers from AIDS? Does he want us withdraw our support for irrigation, which helps those who do not currently have land? Does he want us to stop providing assistance with sanitation, which helps to prevent the urban and rural poor being exposed to disease? Those are the projects that we are undertaking. I cannot imagine a worse way of convincing the people of Zimbabwe that we are their friend, as the right hon. Gentleman says that he wants us to appear.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman's statement is flatly in conflict with the statement made last Sunday by the Leader of the Opposition, who said:

> I think the Government needs to restore better relations with Zimbabwe.

The whole House is baffled as to how the right hon. Gentleman imagines any of his prescriptions will achieve the objective of the leader of his party. Instead, he has indulged in empty gesture politics that will not help to resolve the situation in Zimbabwe. Perhaps he should adjourn, go and see the leader of his party and ask who really speaks for the Tory party on foreign policy.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that Her Majesty's Government have now suspended the export to Zimbabwe of all arms and arms-related equipment, including spare parts for Hawk aircraft?

Is not the blunt, unpalatable truth that, if the United Kingdom acts on its own, it is likely to be far less effective than if we initiate concerted action through the Commonwealth, especially among Zimbabwe's African neighbours? What initiatives have the Government taken to persuade Zimbabwe's neighbours that the stability of Zimbabwe is as much in their interests as in anyone else's?

Finally, if it comes to the question of refugees—we must all fervently hope that that will not be the case—will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will accept not just their legal but their moral obligations to all and any refugees from Zimbabwe, whatever their ethnic origin?

Mr. Cook: On the last point, it is extremely important that we do not say anything that could be misconstrued or create a sense of panic. As it is, we always have contingency plans for every country, in case we should be required to assist. I will say no more on that, if the right hon. and learned Gentleman will allow me.

I agree that the pressure is likely to be more effective if we work with African leaders, and I can assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, in the course of Cairo, I discussed the position of Zimbabwe with the leader of every country neighbouring Zimbabwe.

On the supply of arms and weapons to Zimbabwe, I can tell the House that for a long time we have not provided licences for any equipment that might be used for oppression within Zimbabwe. We recently took a decision that we would not provide any licences for new equipment that might be used in the Congo. We are, of course, saddled with existing commitments from the previous regime—

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): No, you are not.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Lady supports a party which as recently as 1992 sent five Hawks to Zimbabwe, and the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) was a Minister in the Government who agreed to do it. We will of course continue to make sure that the matter is kept under review, but at present there will be no new equipment for Zimbabwe, either for the Congo or for internal repression.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will remember that, at the time of the Lancaster house talks, land and cash from the United Kingdom and the United States were major issues in those discussions and the agreements. He has rightly said that, to date, the redistribution of land has been a dismal failure. He will also know that President Mugabe blames the financial position largely on the British Government. Will my right hon. Friend set the record straight and make it clear that the financial position is a result of the fact that Zimbabwe is not using the funds appropriately to achieve the objectives set out in the Lancaster house agreement?

Mr. Cook: In fairness, it must be said that Britain has supplied £44 million to support land reform in Zimbabwe. We remain willing to help further, but it must be a programme, first, that involves the rule of law and fair price to a willing seller, and secondly, that tackles the needs of the rural poor, not those who happen to have access to, and influence in, Harare. We remain committed to taking that forward. I hope that we will have the opportunity to do so, but we need co-operation from President Mugabe to achieve that.

I share with my hon. Friend his view that the position of the economy of Zimbabwe cannot be blamed on Britain or any other European power. President Mugabe has been in power 20 years and must accept at least some of the responsibility for the present state of Zimbabwe. The people of Zimbabwe are inclined to share that view.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): As the son of parents who stood their ground on a coffee shamba in the heart of Kikuyuland throughout the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, and as someone who made his maiden speech in the House on the subject of Rhodesia almost exactly 40 years ago, may I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that, in the comfort and security of the Chamber, we all need to measure our words extremely carefully? While contingency arrangements must obviously be made for any unhappy developments, threatening words from outside Zimbabwe are not likely to be well received, via the BBC World Service, on their wirelesses by European farmers who may be miles away from any other European.

I have known Mr. Mugabe for a great many years, and my belief is that he is not a man who is incapable of being persuaded to take a reasonable course of action in certain circumstances. Has the Foreign Secretary, for instance, approached Mr. Nelson Mandela or Mr. Kenneth Kaunda, to ask whether they might be prepared to go and mediate,

as they demonstrated during their leadership of their two countries the great contribution that Europeans can make in an African country?

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support and his appeal for restraint. He speaks with real authority. Those of us who have been directly in touch with people in Zimbabwe in the past few weeks can confirm that his words are echoed by people on the ground in Zimbabwe.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the importance of trying to find someone who can connect with President Mugabe and speak to him with respect and authority. I assure him that we are continuing to seek such a way of making an approach. He will understand that it will not help at this time if we start to discuss names in public.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Does my right hon. Friend share my view that, although the issues are emotive, they require a delicate balance between forcefulness and diplomacy, and that the shadow Foreign Secretary's recent indulgence in juvenile partisan abuse on the radio did him no credit at home and may have damaged British interests abroad?

Mr. Cook: I have already been obliged to express my views once on the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude); I do not want to have to return to him.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does the Foreign Secretary realise that the position is getting worse and has been deteriorating in the past two or three weeks? Does he also realise that his perceived inaction makes matters worse not only in Zimbabwe but in Kenya? We hear that some opposition Members in Nairobi are calling for similar policies in Kenya. The right hon. Gentleman cannot walk on the fence indefinitely. He must take action. For how long is he prepared simply to say that he will continue to hector President Mugabe when the latter is not in listening mode?

Mr. Cook: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on awaking from his slumber. I will spare the House repetition of all that I have said since we started discussing the matter at 3.30 pm. President Mugabe's strategy for the general election is clear: he will stand as a candidate who opposes Britain. It would not be wise, nor would it help the people of Zimbabwe, if we volunteered to fill the role that President Mugabe is writing for us.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): My right hon. Friend is right to ignore the Opposition's domestic political agenda. We are in serious difficulties with President Mugabe. The message that my right hon. Friend has repeated today is important, and it should be repeated to the audience in Zimbabwe. That corrupt regime, which has squandered the money for land reform, will not improve the interests of the ordinary African, white or black. However, it is important that the ordinary Zimbabwean knows that land reform is available and that the British Government will be at the forefront of those who try to achieve that fairly and consistently.

Mr. Cook: I am happy to repeat the message, and I hope that the BBC World Service and other outlets will carry it to Zimbabwe so that the truth is known: Britain stands ready to support a programme of land reform provided that it is within the law and that it helps the poor of Zimbabwe. That remains our offer, and we await discussions with people from Zimbabwe. I want the people of Zimbabwe to know that it is not true that we do not support land reform. However, such land reform must be in the interests of the people and not only of the Government.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Are not the vital interests of neighbouring African countries also affected? The present circumstances, in which there is no rule of law and property is expropriated, threaten any prospect of inward investment in Zimbabwe. Some of that property belongs to banks, and its expropriation will thus undermine them. The circumstances threaten not only the economy of Zimbabwe—any suggestion of their repetition elsewhere will undermine prospects of serious inward investment in other neighbouring African countries because people will have no confidence in the security of their investment.

Mr. Cook: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. If confiscation of farms proceeds, I cannot imagine that a prospective investor will have confidence in investing in Zimbabwe in the way in which the people need. That could have a ripple effect in the region. In the areas where farms have been occupied, there have been many protests by farm workers who are now denied their livelihoods and cannot support their families.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Despite the valid criticisms of the policy of violent expropriation, does my right hon. Friend share a slight sense of unease that the media and, indeed, the Chamber, take a keen interest in Zimbabwe only when farmers of European origin are involved? Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be unwise to place Britain in a position whereby we actively endorse the opposition party in Zimbabwe, as the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the shadow Foreign Secretary, appears to do? We should criticise policies that are wrong, but we should not attempt to decide Zimbabwean politics.

Mr. Cook: It is not for us to decide the politics of Zimbabwe or of any other country, but we have the legitimate right to express concern about the human rights and the rule of law in Zimbabwe or elsewhere. I repeat a point that I made earlier, as it requires to be stressed: those farmers who face the prospect of confiscation are every bit as much citizens of Zimbabwe as President Mugabe, and many of their families have been there for generations. I met one at the weekend who is in great distress about what is happening to what he properly and rightly described as "his country". He regards himself as a Zimbabwean; he should be given the chance to help to build the future of Zimbabwe.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Can the Foreign Secretary shed light on the suggestion that, despite the principle of a fixed-term Parliament, no polling date has been determined because the constituency boundaries have not yet been settled?

Mr. Cook: As I understand the legal provision, the Parliament of Zimbabwe will require to be dissolved this month because it will come to the anniversary of its

election and elections for a new Parliament must be held within four months of the dissolution. I welcome the fact that President Mugabe has committed himself to elections in May and hope that he will carry that through, but the right hon. Gentleman raises a serious point. There are valid concerns about Zimbabwe's preparedness for elections and one is bound to say that the only possible responsibility for that lies with the Government who have been in power for the past four years and have known that there must be elections this year.

Points of Order

4.2 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You may be aware that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office published its departmental report yesterday and, yet again, hon. Members had a problem obtaining copies in the House. At 5 pm, the Vote Office was prevented from handing over a copy as the Department had insisted that the document had not yet been laid before Parliament. I understand that although the Foreign Office was preventing Members from obtaining the report through the Vote Office, it was made available on the internet, together with a press release, about two hours earlier. Would not it have been more appropriate for Members to have been the first recipients of that allegedly important document?

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Probably for the first time, the hon. Lady has a point. Due to an administrative error, the report was not laid before the House in time. However, it was laid before the House at 5 pm. We regret that this has happened and are taking steps to make sure that it does not happen again.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. May I draw your attention to the Local Government Bill, which is the principal business of the House later today? When we passed the Human Rights Act 1998, we gave ourselves a discipline that each Bill would carry a certification from a Secretary of State that it was either compliant with human rights legislation or that he was unable to provide such certification. I understand that this is the first Bill of which a Secretary of State has said:

> I am unable to make a statement that in my view the provisions of the Local Government Bill are compatible with the Convention rights . . .

I understand from the Clerk that that is a debatable point, but, bearing in mind the undertakings given by the Lord Chancellor when the human rights legislation was going through the other place about the gravity and seriousness of a Secretary of State being unable to give such an indication, should not the notes available in the Vote Office have offered some explanation?

Madam Speaker: That is why this is certainly not a matter for the Chair; it is for Ministers to explain.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I have not finished; I am still speaking.

As the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) says, the explanatory notes do not make explicit why the Bill is not fully compatible with the European convention on human rights. I suspect that he is referring to clause 91 and section 28, which relates to it.

I repeat that this is not a matter for the Chair. The hon. Gentleman is right in saying that it is a matter for argument and debate. It is for the Minister to explain the Government's position, and also to explain what appears in the Bill.

Now, Mr. Fabricant.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am sorry to have interrupted you.

I was wondering whether the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry had said that he would make a statement to the House, given this morning's news that Alchemy Partners is withdrawing from the Longbridge taskforce set up by him, because of a conflict of interests involving the selection of the chairman of the taskforce by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Madam Speaker: I am not aware that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is seeking to make a statement today.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. For the second time in a week, a Minister has come to the Dispatch Box to apologise for the unavailability of documents in the Vote Office. Would you wholly deprecate any instance of documents' not being available in the Vote Office, and ensure that Ministers pay more attention to their Departments so that this does not happen so regularly?

Madam Speaker: I have already done that quite recently. I gave the House an assurance that I would take steps to help to improve the situation; I have done so, and will continue to do so.

Organ Transplants (Presumed Consent)

4.6 pm

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a national register of people who have not given their consent to transplant of their organs after death; to lay down procedures to be followed before an organ transplant takes place; and for connected purposes.

I apologise in advance for any incoherence. I have been struck by flu, and am thinking of applying for a brain transplant. However, I shall do my best.

The position is quite straightforward. At present, about 200 people die every year owing to the lack of organs suitable for transplant. Only 11 per cent. of the population have registered with the national organ donation scheme, but more than 70 per cent. have said in response to repeated surveys that they would have no objection to the transplant of their organs. In a great many cases, because people did not carry donor cards their organs go with them into the grave or, more frequently, are cremated. As a result, people who could have lived die. A number of cases have been reported in the media recently. I believe that that should concern us all, and that we should consider seriously whether it is in our power to improve the situation.

My Bill proposes that we establish a national register for those who object to the use of their organs for transplant. The existence of the register should be made known as widely as possible. One suggestion is that there should be a box on the electoral registration form. We should ensure that people know that they have such an option, which it is easy for them to take if they do object. About 3 per cent. of the population have signed up to a comparable scheme in Belgium.

The Bill would require a surgeon considering a transplant to take two steps. We would require him or her first to consult the national register of people who object to transplants, and secondly to consult the next of kin, if they are available, to find out whether they object either on behalf of the deceased—perhaps they know that the deceased did object, but had not got around to registering—or because they say that it would greatly distress them. If either condition obtained, the transplant would not take place; but if neither the deceased nor the relatives objected, it would be assumed that consent had been given, and the transplant could take place. The effect would be to cover the middle ground of people who are sympathetic to organ transplants, or have no particular view one way or the other—many people have not given it a thought—but have not obtained a donor card.

Some exemptions are necessary. First, I propose to exempt children on the ground that we cannot reasonably expect a five-year-old to take a decision of the magnitude of whether to go on to a national register. Secondly, for similar reasons, the Bill would exempt people with a long-term mental disability that makes it impossible for them to make a rational assessment of the situation. Thirdly, it would exempt non-residents. We cannot reasonably expect, say, a tourist to be aware of the register.

Beyond that, I am aware of one or two objections. In the Royal College of Nursing debate, where the proposal for informed consent was rejected by three to one, the significant factor seems to have been taking the decision out of the hands of relatives, or the effect on children. Neither would happen under the Bill.

A number of people feel that the Bill does not go far enough and that, if you or I, Madam Speaker, carry a donor card, our relatives should not be able to override our wishes. I believe that, in the interests of achieving a broad consensus, we should accept that relatives have the last word. The British Medical Association warmly supports the Bill in the belief that the number of relatives who will veto a transplant is very small, unless they are aware that the potential donor was opposed.

I have consulted a number of religious groups. The general tenor is that there is no religious objection on the ground that the soul is deemed to leave the body at the time of death. To quote the Board of Deputies of British Jews, it is an honour if the last act of the individual on earth is to save the life of someone else—it is not only an honour but a duty.

I ask the House to support the Bill. I am aware that it is not uncontroversial, but the purpose of ten-minute Bills is to give an opportunity to air issues that may not be entirely ripe for Government legislation. I hope that the House will allow the Bill to proceed to Second Reading, so that we can pursue the debate and prepare the ground for possible Government legislation in the next Session.

I see no reason to detain the House any longer.

4.13 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) moved the Bill in a modest and moderate way. I shall try to reply very briefly in the same spirit. He has cleverly anticipated some of the main objections that might be raised to a shift from having to opt into a transplant scheme to having to opt out of one, principally those concerning children. We are all aware of the scandal involving the removal of children's organs for research purposes at places such as Alder Hey children's hospital in Liverpool, the subject of early-day motion 139 which is open for signatures and was tabled by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath (Mr. Godsiff). That case has perhaps brought to people's attention exactly what is involved when organs are taken from dead bodies.

I personally have no objection to the use of organs for transplanting. Indeed, I have held a donor card since I was old enough to do so. However, I am very concerned about the shift in emphasis from opting into a donor scheme to opting out of one.

The hon. Gentleman's argument might be stronger if we were still talking in the terms—primarily in relation to the physical carrying of a donor card—in which he almost exclusively presented his Bill. The fact is that very many people who would almost certainly have no objection to their organs being used will never get around to filling in a card or, if they do, will end up leaving it at home—as I myself have done on many occasions.

I should have more sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's view if it were the only way of securing a plentiful supply of organs for transplant, but it is not. We live in the age of the internet and of electronic communication. If it is as easy as he suggests for people to be advised of their right to opt out by ticking boxes on ballot papers, for example, why do we not first at least try to use those methods to ensure that more people opt in? There are numerous opportunities for people to be asked to opt into a scheme and to have their decision registered electronically, so that, over time, if someone really wishes

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

his or her organs to be used in that way, it could easily be arranged. They would have only to say yes once, and their consent would be placed on an internet site, electronically and permanently maintained up to date.

As I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge—hence the concessions that he made in framing his Bill—this is not an open and shut case in which there are no arguments on one side, with all the arguments on the other. All that can be done to try to make it easy for people to register their willingness to have their organs used should be done before we fall back on the position of very last resort—that of moving to a scheme whereby consent is presumed.

Before I and many other people who have very great sympathy for what the hon. Gentleman is trying to achieve could give him our support, we would have to be convinced that ordinary people who wish their organs to be used have been contacted in a manner that makes it much easier than it is for them to register that fact. If in five years the hon. Gentleman can demonstrate that we have all been contacted and given numerous opportunities to register in a single simple action on an electronic database our willingness to have our organs used in that way, and if he can demonstrate that there has been very little uptake of that, I will listen to his proposals with more sympathy. However, to date, those modern methods have not been tried nearly hard enough. Until they are, I should feel bound to oppose his Bill.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business):—

The House divided: Ayes 113, Noes 23.

Division No. 159] **[4.19 pm**

AYES

Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Ashton, Joe
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Best, Harold
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cummings, John
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Donohoe, Brian H
Etherington, Bill
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Humble, Mrs Joan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
McAllion, John
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Rapson, Syd
Rendel, David
Roy, Frank
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soames, Nicholas
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Dr. Nick Palmer and
Ms Jenny Jones.

NOES

Amess, David
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Burnett, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Crausby, David
Fallon, Michael
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Livsey, Richard
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Hara, Eddie
Öpik, Lembit
Plaskitt, James
Robathan, Andrew
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Waterson, Nigel
Wilshire, David

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Edward Leigh and
Dr. Julian Lewis.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Dr. Nick Palmer, Mr. Vernon Coaker, Dr. Evan Harris, Dr. Howard Stoate, Mr. Michael Jabez Foster, Jane Griffiths, Ms Jenny Jones and Dr. Ian Gibson.

Organ Transplants (Presumed Consent)

Dr. Nick Palmer accordingly presented a Bill to establish a national register of people who have not given their consent to transplant of their organs after death; to lay down procedures to be followed before an organ transplant takes place; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 July, and to be printed [Bill 109].

Orders of the Day

Local Government Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I should inform the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. Madam Speaker has also imposed a 15-minute restriction on Back Benchers' speeches.

4.30 pm

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State rang me last night sending his apologies to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. He also sent very special greetings to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman). My right hon. Friend has, of course, been in Japan at a G8 meeting of Environment Ministers, and has also had a meeting with the new Japanese Prime Minister. He is currently travelling home.

Last spring, the House debated the Government's first Local Government Bill. That legislation introduced the new duty of best value, which came into force last week. This Bill takes another firm step towards modern local government. It has already been considered in draft by a Joint Committee of both Houses last Session, and by their lordships.

Over the past three years—in stark contrast to the ideological dogma that underpinned the Conservative party's approach to local government—the Government have worked to develop a new partnership with local people and local councils. We have worked to give local people a bigger stake in shaping their future, and to revitalise local democracy—fostering new local democratic institutions that are appropriate for the new millennium.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister explain how, in a scripted speech, she has the brass neck to go on about ideological dogma when the principal purpose of the Bill is compulsorily to impose a system that thousands of councillors regard as less accountable, less transparent and less representative? Why does not she listen to the view of Lord Dixon-Smith, who opposes the compulsory provision? He has 28 years of experience in local government, in contrast to her meagre three years of service there.

Ms Armstrong: I was clearly wrong to give way, so I shall continue with my speech. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will learn something from it, and realise that he has made a few mistakes.

We have increased the level of resources available to local councils to meet local needs. We have established new partnerships, giving local councillors real influence in shaping national policies. We have abolished crude and universal capping, and we have replaced the ideological dead hand of compulsory competitive tendering with a new best value regime that has been widely welcomed by local authorities and is already delivering better value local services for local people. We are putting local people at the centre of determining what works best for them in their localities.

The new Local Government Bill builds on the foundations of that new partnership and delivers a new democratic settlement for local communities. The Bill will bring new life to local government, bringing an end to the red-tape town hall committee culture and building modern local government that puts local people at the centre of decision making and enlivens local democracy.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): How does the right hon. Lady square this extraordinary paean for her own efforts over the past three years with the brutal shift of £500 million of central Government money from the shire counties to the inner cities?

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman cannot add up. This Government, in contrast to the previous Government, have put a further 7.8 per cent. in real terms into local government over the past three years. It is not true that £500 million less goes to shire areas now than they had at the start of this Parliament, or than they would have had if the Conservative Government had continued in office. Over the three years before the election, local government finance was cut by 4.3 per cent.

The Government's modernising agenda for local government is a unified package: changes in local political structures are integral to effective service delivery. Modern local government is, in turn, a vital part of the fabric of the dynamic, democratic, fair and inclusive society that people want to see. It is vital to securing the quality of life that people deserve and have a right to expect.

The Bill makes much clearer to the public the fact that local councils are there to serve, and the public will understand more clearly who is accountable for local decisions and where the buck stops when things go wrong. That is a vital component of any democratic renewal. The Bill is intended to bring new life to local democracy and to create dynamic local government that listens to what people really want.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The right hon. Lady refers to accountability to the public, but many people are worried that public access to council meetings and decision making will be restricted. The Darlington Labour council leader said:

> Holding meetings in public would merely create a theatrical experience for onlookers.

Does the right hon. Lady agree that the Bill will increase secrecy, lack of openness and lack of transparency in local government?

Ms Armstrong: As my speech continues, I shall deal with those issues. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will enjoy that part of my speech, and he can wait for it to come.

The vast majority of local councils have already begun to modernise their working arrangements by consulting their public and devising new ways of working that empower them to tackle 21st century problems. The Bill

[Ms Armstrong]

will create the framework so that all citizens can be assured that they are governed locally by a local authority that is fit for the purpose for the new millennium.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Will the Minister give way on that point?

Ms Armstrong: Which point?

Mr. Gray: I wished to intervene on the point that the right hon. Lady was making. She obviously did not gather that.

Along with all the new Labour cant words that she uses, the right hon. Lady makes great play of allowing local authorities to decide how they will run themselves and modernise themselves for the new century. Why, then, has she said specifically that most councils in the land may not do what they wish, but must conform to one of the three options that she offers them? Why has she ignored the unanimous cross-party recommendation from the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee, on which I served?

Ms Armstrong: I am coming to that point. I thought that the hon. Gentleman was challenging my saying that we are in the new millennium. Given where he is coming from, I would not have been surprised if he had.

Local councils have a vital role in exercising community leadership. They know that if they are to carry out that role effectively, they need to modernise the way in which they work to meet new demands—for example, social inclusion, community safety and sustainable regeneration—in addition to local government's historic purposes of nurturing and educating our children and protecting the vulnerable.

Only modern councils can carry out those vital roles—councils that are in touch with the people, with councillors scrutinising the work of executive members and thus ensuring that those who make the decisions locally are held accountable for those decisions locally. They will deliver better quality local services in a responsive way, and work within a strong, clear ethical framework that strengthens the bond of trust between the community and those who seek to serve it.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the devolution settlement for Wales is reflected in this legislation, and we have been working with the National Assembly to achieve that. Both the Government and the Assembly agree that it is essential to get the arrangements for local government right. We are listening to views in Wales to ensure that we get the approach right for Wales, and it is up to councils in England and Wales to listen to their local communities too.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Before the Minister leaves the subject of Wales, will she say something about community planning? I appreciate the work that has gone into the co-operation between the Government and the National Assembly, but the Welsh Local Government Association has requested that the Bill impose on local authorities a duty to undertake community planning, rather than merely giving them the power to do so.

Ms Armstrong: I am becoming more and more convinced that I should not take interventions, because the next point in my speech is to reaffirm that the Government have already told the House of Lords that we have agreed that point with the Welsh Assembly and other bodies.

Part I gives local authorities a broad new power to promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of their areas, or of the people who live there. It will give the initiative back to local authorities, enabling them to take new action to respond to the specific needs of their communities, and build new partnerships with other local bodies to deliver real improvements in local conditions.

Accountable councils in this age can do more than just deliver services. They also give clear direction to their communities, and help to ensure that local action reflects local priorities and is co-ordinated effectively. Effective community leadership means generating support for change and working with others to deliver that change. It means managing and negotiating differences and co-ordinating and facilitating action by others, not just by the council itself.

That is why community strategies are such an important part of our plans to modernise local government. With the new power to promote well-being, it will be for local authorities and their communities to determine what action should be taken. We therefore want to see strategies being prepared by "local strategic partnerships", bringing together councils, public sector agencies, local businesses, voluntary organisations and local communities. Those strategies should set out a shared vision for the community that reflects local aspirations and recognises the potential for all sections of the community to contribute ideas and resources.

Because of the importance that we attach to that role, and the potential for effective community planning to help deliver many of the changes that are essential if local quality of life is to be improved, we will table appropriate amendments to give local authorities a duty, rather than simply a power, to undertake community planning.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Clause 3 deals with the limits that will be put on local authorities' powers, and with the prospect that that will be done through guidance. When the Bill goes into Standing Committee, will that Committee be able to see examples of that guidance, and know where the Government intend to put the limits?

Ms Armstrong: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have consistently sought to give the House opportunities to see guidance and regulations during the passage of legislation through the House. We certainly intend to do the same this time, and substantial draft guidance has already been issued in relation to other parts of the Bill. We have received comments on that guidance, and some of the Government amendments will reflect that process. We want to rework the proposals constantly, in the light of the ideas and views that are brought forward.

The new powers and responsibilities for local government, in addition to the new responsibilities in connection with best value and the new freedoms arising from changes in the financial regime, present both challenges and opportunities for modern councils.

The traditional council committee structure is not well placed to deal with the new responsibilities that modernisation brings—it simply cannot cope. Local people

deserve better. That is what the reforms of the political management system will provide—a more efficient, transparent and accountable system that can meet the challenges of modern governance.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Armstrong: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I will finish this section of my speech, because I suspect that it deals with a matter that he wants to raise.

Amendments were carried in the other place which have contradictory effects, but which essentially could allow councils to retain the status quo. That cannot be an option. We simply do not agree that the outdated committee system can deliver. All councils will have to change to reflect the new demands on them and the expectations of local people.

Under these provisions, councils will draw up new constitutions in which the full council, meeting in public, decides the policy framework and budget, while the executive—whatever its form—is accountable for implementing the policies and delivering the services that local people want within that policy framework. The overview and scrutiny committees will hold the executive to account for what they have done and what they are planning to do. The provisions will also ensure that councils consider how the implementation of service delivery is working for the citizen.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: I really should give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) first.

Mr. Smith: The Minister said that the Government were in the business of devolving power. However, the Bill centralises power, in the hands of either a mayor or a leader with a cabinet. I accept that some local authorities may want that system, but others prefer the status quo. If the Government really are in the business of devolving power, those local authorities should have the opportunity to develop a system that reflects the problems and ambitions of their local community.

Ms Armstrong: I think that my hon. Friend has not recognised that many councils are already changing, not because we say so, but because they know that the present system simply cannot meet people's needs. If my hon. Friends will bear with me until I am further into my speech, I will develop those arguments.

We will not force councils down one route. The options available to them are far more extensive than anything for the past 150 years. I remind the House that the current system was introduced when the only people who went into local government belonged to the squirearchy—the people who owned land. *[Interruption.]* Friends of Conservative Members, obviously. Committee systems were set up for people to come together every now and again to agree matters—not very many—for their area. That is the basic system, and it is the only legal system that can be used today.

Three broad types of executive are set out in the Bill—mayor and cabinet, leader and cabinet, mayor and council manager. There is, however, considerable scope for diversity within those options to meet local circumstances. Local councils will, for the first time for more than 150 years, be able to develop different structures that reflect the different local circumstances. The options allow great variation within each framework, even though many have failed to recognise that.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I hate to have to disagree with the conclusion to which my right hon. Friend is coming on the Bill, but is it not a fact that the Joint Committee, on which I served, expressed the view that an improved status quo should be offered within the Bill? That would not be the status quo exactly as it is now, but a fourth option—an improved status quo.

Ms Armstrong: Amendments have been made to the Bill, and they reflect the ideas that came from the Joint Committee. I hope that my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to express those ideas in Committee. We are prepared to consider other ways of doing things. I want to be responsive to the points that my hon. Friend is making, but I also want to enable councils to ensure that they can conduct their business in ways that deal with the issues that face them today—the issues involved in being a community leader—in a way that frequently has simply not been their role in the past. That is much more important today than previously.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Armstrong: I am trying to deal with the previous intervention.

Hon. Members: Ooh.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): She has lost her cliché.

Ms Armstrong: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am deeply grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way so graciously. I want to ask her one simple question. All the systems that she has outlined will require tough scrutiny and, as she knows, scrutiny committees are not always met with unalloyed appreciation when they express their views. What measures in the Bill will guarantee that a scrutiny committee will be given sufficient resources to deal with the real possibility of corruption and distortion of honesty in relation to council matters, and will be independent of the people who are working for the leader and the tiny group around him or her?

Ms Armstrong: I agree that scrutiny is ever more important—and that that is one of the problems with the status quo. There is no opportunity within the status quo legitimately to pursue scrutiny. That is one of the reasons why we say that there needs to be a change. As my hon. Friend may already know, we as a party have already made it absolutely clear that no whip will be allowed on scrutiny committees. We are discussing and working with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and other officers to ensure that they are content that they will have the appropriate mechanisms to support scrutiny properly.

[Ms Armstrong]

They are discussing with us the nature of the guidance and so on that will go alongside the Bill to secure exactly what my hon. Friend asks for.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: I have to make some progress with my speech. I shall be more than happy to give way in a moment or two.

The Bill makes it clear that local people will decide the form of the executive, but our reforms are not simply about mayors and cabinets. The executive is only one half of the new executive arrangements. The other half—overview and scrutiny—is equally important. Indeed, I have said consistently that when setting up a new constitution, councils should consider overview and scrutiny first, because without effective overview and scrutiny, any new executive arrangements simply will not work. It is also clear that the representative role of councillors will become much more important. Councillors will spend more time bringing the views of local people and stakeholders to bear on the development and implementation of the council's policy, either through the overview and scrutiny committees or in full council meetings.

It has been said that those councillors will be second class. I reject that. The role is different, but it is no less important than that of any member of the executive. The present committee system offers no opportunity for the routine scrutiny of decisions, nor for regular and systematic examination of their implementation. No one can defend that.

Dr. Lynne Jones: I assure my right hon. Friend that when I was a member of Birmingham city council, I took extremely seriously the scrutiny of policy—as I do in this place. As a member of the council, I was able to do so because I had access to officers.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the need for community leaders. Surely, the real impediment to true community leadership is interference from Government.

Ms Armstrong: That is why the Bill includes proposals to give local government far more freedom to develop matters—that is what the well-being power is all about.

I am aware that my hon. Friend, as the chair of a council committee, made sure that she followed up policies and policy development. That was not the point that I was making. My point is that it is the responsibility of the council to do that, and to do so in public so that the public are involved and can ensure that questions are asked and that there is accountability. That is the key to these changes—many people have not yet realised that.

It is clear that the representative role of councillors will become much more important. Councillors will spend more time bringing the views of local people and stakeholders to bear on the development and implementation of the council's policies, either through the overview and scrutiny committees or in council meetings.

Some people have asked why the Bill does not insist that executives meet in public. The executive is not a committee; individual members will be given the right to take decisions. Indeed, at present many decisions are delegated to officers. A formal event, such as a public meeting, does not make an arrangement transparent or accountable. If we are honest, we all know what really happens. Frequently, a political group meets to debate the options and to take decisions; often, there are not even minutes of the meeting. If minutes are taken, they are certainly not made public. The meetings are not open or accountable. The committee then formally takes a decision, often without even revealing which options were considered. That is what happens at present; it is not open and transparent.

It is right that members of an executive should have the opportunity to think. Decisions will be published—as will reasons and background papers. In the draft guidance, we have already stated that

> significant decisions should not be a surprise to those whom they affect.

Too many councils have rushed into interim arrangements that have not taken into account the points made in the draft guidance.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): I agree with the Minister that decisions made in caucus—whatever the political party—do not serve the public well. They are not open and transparent to the public. However, how on earth will private meetings of executives—in closed session—help the participation of the public? How are the public to know about the debate and the decisions? The executives will merely present them with a fait accompli. How will the Bill result in greater participation, transparency or openness?

Ms Armstrong: As I have already said, the executive is not a committee. Decisions will be published, and will be published quickly; the options that have been considered will be published; and the minutes that lead to the decisions and the way in which the decisions are taken will be published. All that will be open to scrutiny. Therefore, decisions will be accountable in a way that decisions taken at the moment are simply not accountable. I urge my hon. Friends to consider how people take decisions and take time to think. If an individual takes a decision, it is very difficult to legislate for that decision to be taken in public.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I have listened carefully to my right hon. Friend. However, if people come to believe that there is more secrecy under the new arrangements than under the old arrangements, the whole intent of the Bill, which is to revitalise local democracy, will be undermined from the start. Surely the Bill's drafting must ensure that that does not happen.

Ms Armstrong: I agree with my hon. Friend. I am trying to describe the real problems that there are with the argument that one obtains openness by formally taking decisions in public. I do not believe that that guarantees openness or accountability. We want to ensure that all the options considered are in the open and that the way in which they are considered and the advice given on them receive proper scrutiny. After all, we are well used to such a system in this Chamber, and our proposal will lead to

improvements in the quality of decision making in local government and to the way in which such decisions are held accountable.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Is not one of the key points that we should consider the ability of people who may be interested in a decision to have an influence on that decision before it is a made? If an executive meets in private, how can anyone have an influence on a decision before it is made? At present, under the system that involves party political groups, people know that decisions are being made or are being considered, so they have an opportunity to try to influence them.

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend obviously did not hear or understand what I said. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] We are trying to hold a debate, but Conservative Members are not used to that.

In the draft guidance, we say that significant decisions should not be a surprise to those whom they may affect, and there is much more in the guidance on that point. It explains how executives will consult on, and work through, options before they take a decision. Some authorities—and members of them are present today—take careful pre-scrutiny positions so that their scrutiny committees are involved before a decision is made. Some of those decisions will be taken in public. However, some emergency decisions are taken by an officer without people receiving any prior knowledge. Such decisions do not receive scrutiny and they are not accountable. In future, emergency decisions will be taken by an executive, and they may need to be taken quickly on the day that a problem arises. In those circumstances, it would be difficult and might threaten the safety of children or other people if executives were not able to take decisions without having to give the three-days' notice that is in the current arrangements. The aim is to achieve more open and accountable decision making. I hope that the ideas of colleagues and others will enable us to include a process in the Bill that people are convinced is more open and will allow proper decision making.

Mr. Gray: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: No, I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

I urge all councils and councillors to recognise that the new system is part of a new culture of openness, accountability and closer working relationships with the public, and I hope that they will introduce ways of working that express that culture and which are not bound up with traditional methods.

Mr. Llew Smith: As I understand it, the Bill does not require the executive even to publish the agenda. If it does not, how can people outside the executive—other councillors and the general public—know what policies are being discussed and what options are available?

Ms Armstrong: That is precisely why I say that there should be a new culture. On some occasions, it would be absolutely right and possible to publish an agenda, but if, for example, a child abuse case required a quick decision, there would be no opportunity to publish an agenda. Hon. Members say that we can deal with such situations now, but we are seeking to ensure that elected members make those decisions, whereas in the past they have been almost exclusively delegated to officers. Such a shift requires new rules. If councils are working within that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I know that the right hon. Lady is seeking to answer points made by her colleagues, but she should be addressing the Chair, not turning her back on me.

Ms Armstrong: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I usually talk only to the Chair, but sometimes I feel that I am being rude to those behind me.

I am seeking to make sure that hon. Members know that we aim to introduce a new culture, but we are also trying to find ways to ensure that there is proper, effective decision making. It is clear that Opposition Members do not want proper, effective decision making; they are simply looking for ways to have a go at local government.

I move now to part III, which introduces the new ethical framework. That is an integral part of our plans to bring new life to local democracy. Effective democratic government is dependent on the bond of trust between the community and those who represent them, whether in local, regional or central Government. Restoring and strengthening that bond is vital. No unethical behaviour is acceptable. In the few cases where it does occur, we need to make sure that there is a suitable framework for investigating and punishing any wrongdoing. Part III establishes such a framework.

Sir Paul Beresford: Many hon. Members on both sides of the House are deeply concerned that the mechanism that the Minister is setting up will engender the possibility of more corruption. Part of her answer to that point is the scrutiny committee, which she says should not be whipped. If, however, she has read the evidence given to the Select Committee by the leader of Hammersmith and Fulham council, she will be aware of the pressure of patronage—cronyism. How can she answer that point?

Ms Armstrong: Every system, as we know, is open to corruption. We intend to make sure that there are methods of dealing with wrong-doing, by making processes as open and accountable as possible, in a way that they are not at the moment. We hope that the Bill will ensure that anybody who is interested in coming into public service for corrupt means thinks that it is not worth trying to do so. I believe that the provisions in part III will help us to do that.

Those provisions establish a framework, the principal components of which are: statutory codes of conduct to which all members of local authorities must sign up; standards committees within councils to promote and maintain high standards of conduct; and an independent mechanism for the investigation of allegations of misconduct. In England, the latter function will be the role of a new body, the Standards Board; and in Wales, the Commission for Local Administration in Wales will take on the task. There will also be a separate tribunal mechanism with the power to impose suitable penalties, ranging from censure to suspension from standing as a councillor for up to five years. Alongside those arrangements, the Bill includes provision for the repeal of surcharging. That is in line with the recommendations of the Nolan committee and, more recently, the Joint Committee that considered the draft Bill.

[Ms Armstrong]

The welfare services provisions in clauses 86 and 87 are only a small part of the Bill, but they are vital to many people in Great Britain. They are designed to improve the quality and diversity of support services by introducing a new holistic planning and grant-making system at local level. That means that vulnerable people will be able to receive the support they need to live independently in the community, and it gives local authorities an important community leadership role in the planning and provision of services in partnership with others.

We shall table an amendment in Committee to facilitate joint working through a one-off transfer of data at the point of change to the new system. That will ensure that vulnerable people continue to receive the vital services they need during the changeover period, and beyond.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Armstrong: On this point?

Mr. Bercow: Yes—it is a most important point. The right hon. Lady rightly refers to standards committees, and I am sure that she is familiar with the provisions of clause 49. Will the regulations governing the size and composition of those committees be subject to the negative or the affirmative procedure?

Ms Armstrong: That is not the point to which I was speaking, but never mind. I am sure that that will be an issue of debate in Committee—

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): She does not know!

Ms Armstrong: We have not yet finished the Bill. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we worked co-operatively on the previous legislation; on many occasions when pressure was exerted in Committee to change provisions in the Bill, we agreed to do so. I do not want to preclude the possibility of doing that with this Bill. Perhaps he likes to work in a confrontational way, but I prefer to work, as far as possible, in a co-operative way—as he knows from his experience on previous legislation.

The Government also intend to introduce an amendment to the Bill that will enable local authorities to respond better to the needs of the national child care strategy. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), submitted an outline of the amendment in a parliamentary answer given today. Local authorities cannot pass on any of the costs of the child care that they provide to parents who receive the working families tax credit. We will continue to provide free child care where children are in need, but we want the child care tax credit within the WFTC to help families with their child care costs. Therefore, the amendment will allow local authorities to charge other parents receiving WFTC a proportion of their child care costs.

Clause 91 amends section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986—more infamously known as section 28. The Government are committed to its repeal and will table amendments to achieve that. It would be fair to say that the debate so far on this issue has generated more heat than light, so before Opposition Members attempt to raise the temperature again, let me set out clearly the limits and deficiencies of the legislation.

Contrary to popular belief, section 2A does not apply to schools and, therefore, has no effect on what is taught in the classroom. That was clearly recognised by the previous Government and was spelled out in guidance that they issued in 1994. It does, however, inhibit local authorities from addressing the legitimate needs of a particular section of their communities. The Government believe that there is no place for such discriminatory legislation on the statute book.

Local authorities should be free to address the needs of the gay community in exactly the same way as they address the needs of other groups, and it should be for authorities—properly accountable to local people—to decide what action they need to take to improve the quality of life of all sections of their community. That simple principle is at the heart of the Bill. I make no apologies for it, and none for telling the House that we will table amendments to the Bill to repeal section 2A of the 1986 Act.

In response to an earlier intervention, I can say that there are considerable doubts whether section 2A is compatible with the European convention on human rights. Clause 91, inserted in the other place, amends but also reaffirms the provisions of section 2A. By extension, the amendment makes it doubtful that the Bill is compatible with the European convention on human rights.

Mr. Robathan: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. She said that the measure did not affect schools, but section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 states that a local authority shall not

> promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

Does the right hon. Lady want local authorities to spend money on that?

Ms Armstrong: That Act was overtaken by a subsequent Education Act, which put the teaching of sex education in the hands of governors, in consultation with parents. The previous Government issued guidance which made that clear. The guidance stated that section 28 could not apply in schools.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I have no hesitation in supporting the amendments that the Government are to introduce on the matter. On the issue of law making, however, my right hon. Friend should publish the advice that she was given. I find the Bill neutral. The previous Act may be contrary to human rights, but the Bill is not. When the Human Rights Bill went through another place, the Lord Chancellor said that there would be a burden on Government to explain why it was not possible, unusually, to make a statement of human rights compliance.

It should also be borne in mind that, since the case of Pepper *v.* Hart, what is said in the Chamber can be considered by the Law Lords. Unless the fact of human rights compliance is explicitly stated on the Floor of the House or in the explanatory memorandum, which is silent

on the matter, there could be confusion rather than clarity. Will my right hon. Friend therefore publish the advice that she received?

Ms Armstrong: I have made it clear that we believe that there are considerable doubts whether section 2A is compatible. It is our responsibility to say that we are certain that a Bill is compatible. We are not certain; there are considerable doubts. I believe that the comments on the Bill have been published, as the advice was given by lawyers to the organisation known as Justice. My hon. Friend says that the Bill may be compatible, but because it amends section 2A that may bring its compatibility into doubt.

As we move into the 21st century, we also move towards a new era of local government and local partnership, with councils working together—

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The Minister claimed that the Local Government Act 1988, which includes section 28, was superseded by another Act. However, I believed that we were considering section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986, which was superseded by the 1988 Act. The 1988 Act should therefore prevail. However, is the Minister suggesting that the European convention on human rights will render the House powerless to protect children and to uphold the protection that parents want enshrined in law?

Ms Armstrong: Section 28 is not about protecting children. The Government have made their position clear on the responsibilities of sex and relationship education. The Education Act 1994 places the responsibility for that clearly in the hands of governors in consultation with parents. We affirm that.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said that he would publish guidance, which clearly outlines the way in which governors should deal with sex and relationship education. Teaching and work with children have nothing to do with section 28. Conservative Members should bear that in mind when they vehemently oppose abolishing section 28. They are not trying to protect children. I wonder what they are trying to do if not to promote prejudice and bigotry in this country.

Mr. Mackinlay: If it is not possible to get the Bill through Parliament in the form that my right hon. Friend and I would like, perhaps because of decisions in the other place, we will face the dilemma of whether to enact a Bill that does not comply with the European convention on human rights. That would be misunderstood around the world, because the Bill also covers mayors, elections and so on. It would be perverse if, to correct stupid law making under previous Governments and poor advice from the Lord Chancellor, we ultimately produced an Act which stated that it contravened human rights legislation. That is bonkers.

Ms Armstrong: That is not a matter for me. I am not in charge of the House's decisions. I believe that the House will make the Bill compatible with the European convention on human rights. I hope that Opposition Members and Members in another place will take note.

As we move into the 21st century, we are also moving towards a new era of local government and local partnership, with councils working together with other organisations and local people to improve the quality of life in their local communities. Many local authorities already have a vision of their future; the Bill should give them the means to realise it.

As I explained earlier, the version of the Bill that has been brought to this House from another place is not yet in the form that the Government would like. We shall propose changes when we progress to the next stage. I repeat that we want the Bill to be compatible with human rights legislation.

The Bill is far from being a centralising measure. We intend it to return local government to the heart of local communities. It grants new powers and their attendant responsibilities to councils and the local people whom they serve. The Bill should receive a Second Reading.

5.24 pm

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Local Government Bill [*Lords*] because it is a centralising measure which will have the effect of undermining local democracy, because it will put pressure on local councils to introduce structures which may not suit local needs and circumstances, which will tend to encourage and facilitate a culture of secrecy and lack of consultation, engender corruption, diminish the role of ordinary councillors, encourage the growth of a class of professional local politicians with large salaries, pensions and other fringe benefits, and place officers in a position of potential conflict of interest, because the arrangements in the Bill for the conduct of local referenda in respect of elected mayors are inadequate, because the new power to promote economic, social and environmental well-being, while welcome in principle, is insufficiently defined and overly subject to ministerial interference, because the powers being taken relating to the frequency of elections are too centralising in their nature, and because, although containing welcome provisions relating to the protection of school children from the promotion of homosexuality in schools and from bullying, and the conduct of local councillors and officers, it fails to provide for open, accountable and empowered local government with councils adopting structures that best suit local needs, including modernised and streamlined versions of the committee system".

I regret the Deputy Prime Minister's absence, although, having heard the genuine concerns expressed from both sides of the House, I can understand why he chose today to be absent. I understand that he is on important business, but I trust that the Minister will pass on my greetings and say that we have missed his inimitable contribution to the debate on Second Reading of another significant Bill.

The Minister made a torrent of extravagant claims. I have never heard so much jargon on a single issue. She said that the Bill will revitalise local democracy, put local people at the centre and bring a new democratic settlement for local communities and talked of a democratic, dynamic and fair solution, of empowering people to tackle 21st century problems and so on. Those aspirations are universally shared, but largely irrelevant to the subject at hand and most unlikely to be delivered by the Bill.

We welcome aspects such as the introduction of standards committees, the abolition of surcharging and the extension of councils' responsibilities, but we regret that the Minister appeared to rule out the Lords amendment to allow councils to keep the fourth option—the status quo. The Bill is a hotch-potch and the consideration of it has been a shambles throughout. We have seen more of that today. Proposals aimed at setting in concrete the shape and form of local government for decades should be thought through in minute detail, experimented with, piloted properly in the real world and tempered to reflect the views

[Mr. Archie Norman]

of practitioners, but these have been cobbled together to such an extent that the Lords passed 438 amendments—one for every five and a half lines. It is no good her saying that we have not finished the Bill because, as it will play a role in shaping democracy in this country, it should have been thought through and experimented with in the first place.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): The last major reform of the structure of local government was the abolition of the Greater London council. Can the hon. Gentleman describe the temperate way in which pilot schemes were introduced by the Conservatives when that was suggested?

Mr. Norman: The whole House had sufficient experience of the GLC in operation, so there was no need to experiment with abolition.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: No. I want to make progress, but I shall take interventions later.

In short, the Bill is another ill-thought-through collection of proposals that are widely seen as unsatisfactory on both sides of the House. That is apparent today. At its heart, it reflects a fundamentally flawed thought: the Government's belief that imposing detailed structures and processes from on high will solve the problems of local government. It will not, because the problem is not one of process and structure, but one of substance—what local councils are free to do, what controls and restrictions central Government impose on them and how they are financed.

Instead of addressing those issues, the Bill represents more centralisation. Worse than that, it will reinforce the dominance of political parties and narrow cliques, encourage secrecy and deter the participation of the able volunteer councillor. Conservative Members recognise that local government has become over-centralised, but when Labour came to power many councillors on all sides looked forward to a different approach. The Deputy Prime Minister himself said that local authorities

> should be liberated from the fetters of Whitehall and the stupid restrictions of the Treasury that inhibit growth and destroy jobs . . .

No doubt he still hopes to be released from the stupid restrictions of the Treasury, as seen in the Budget.

Today, those same councillors are bitterly disappointed because the Government are the most centralising ever. Far from liberating local government, Labour is imposing an ever tightening straitjacket on local democracy. Jeremy Beecham, the Labour chairman of the Local Government Association, summed that up when he warned of

> the strange death of local democracy . . .

Dr. Lynne Jones: The hon. Gentleman implies that he agrees with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. If so, which Treasury restrictions do the Conservatives propose to remove?

Mr. Norman: I rarely find an opportunity to agree with the Deputy Prime Minister. Again, I am sorry that he is absent, and cannot hear me do so. The Conservatives have already said that we would like capping to be removed from local authorities: that is shared ground.

The Bill compounds the problem that we already have. It is a straitjacket that centralises power not just within the state, but within councils. Councils will be denied the right to choose alternative, more open ways of working.

Mr. Llew Smith: Although it is fairly obvious that I disagree with substantial parts of the Bill, I am somewhat confused by the statement that previous Governments wanted—and, indeed, the present Opposition want—to liberate local authorities, and return more powers to them. Can the hon. Gentleman tell me how many of the 200 Acts that altered the powers of local authorities during those previous 18 years gave more powers to authorities or liberated them?

Mr. Norman: I have made clear our belief that local government has become too centralised. We have a substantial agenda for decentralisation; it is not a matter for today's debate, but I am very willing to take the hon. Gentleman through it on another occasion. No doubt the opportunity will arise.

Sir Paul Beresford: Perhaps my hon. Friend should ask the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) to have a look at the best value legislation that has been passed. It is the most centralising and forceful legislation that has ever been imposed on local government in any field.

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend has great experience of these matters, and makes his point powerfully.

The effect of cabinet government will be to vest power in local political parties, especially when one party is dominant. More than ever, a narrow clique of party politicians in caucus will be able to make all the major executive decisions. No longer will the committee structure provide a role for individual councillors and minority parties, and safeguard the participation of all councillors.

It is not only Conservative Members who believe that there is already a problem to be solved.

> Some of our Councils are quite frankly very badly run . . . The Party is usually controlled by a small clique and they have very poor relationships with the community which they serve.

Those are the words of the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney).

That brings me to the question of secrecy.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: I want to make some progress.

It is one of the great achievements of the last 40 years that local government in the United Kingdom has been open government. It was Margaret Thatcher who, in 1960, forced councils to open all meetings to the press and the public, and it was a Conservative Government who passed the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, which enables the public to obtain local council papers three days before meetings. It is a Labour Government who are now bringing back secrecy, and closing the doors to the public.

Andrew Ecclestone, of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, has said:

> we are now finding a Labour Government removing the rights Mrs. Thatcher gave us.

It was the Prime Minister who said:

> The first right of a citizen in a mature democracy should be the right of information. It is time to sweep away the cobwebs of secrecy which hang over far too much Government activity.

Instead, cabinet government as prescribed in the Bill will mean that executive decisions are made in private and that leading councillors will no longer be accountable for their views. There will be no pre-scrutiny and ordinary citizens will not be able to lobby councillors ahead of time because they will not know what is coming up on the agenda. Both points were well made by Labour Members.

The Bill will mean that full minutes will no longer be available for scrutiny and that papers and agendas will no longer be available in advance. Several Labour Members have made that point. It is not just a question of introducing a new culture, as the Minister said. Such waffle is risible in response to the genuine concerns of experienced Members on both sides of the House. Proper safeguards should be in place, not just in the guidance, but in the Bill, otherwise, for many councils, standards of openness will step back 40 years.

Dr. Whitehead: Has not the hon. Gentleman read the Bill where it states that the council meeting continues to be the supreme body in relation to policy decisions in local authorities? Does he not understand that the scrutiny extends to decisions that may be taken, as opposed to decisions that have been taken? His points about it being impossible to scrutinise a decision before it is passed appear to have no substance.

Mr. Norman: I have to wonder whether it is the hon. Gentleman who has not read the Bill. It contains no provision for proper pre-scrutiny or for ordinary citizens to know what is coming up in council meetings and discuss things with councillors ahead of time. There is no provision to ensure that people are held properly accountable and that minutes are fully published.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: I want to make some progress.

Without improved safeguards, cabinet government conducted in secrecy will reduce accountability, concentrate power and increase the scope for corruption.

If the Minister will not listen to us, why does she not listen to the concerns of Labour councillors and the local press throughout the country? Why does she not listen to the Birmingham Labour councillor who said:

> decisions made behind locked doors . . . is exactly how Hitler started and it is a very dangerous precedent for a modern city like Birmingham?

Why does the Minister not listen to the *Hull Daily Mail*? Again, it is a pity that the Deputy Prime Minister is not here, but doubtless she will let him know. It said:

> A cloak of secrecy could descend on important council decision making in Hull.

There are many other such instances. Far from revitalising local government and decreasing secrecy and concentration of power, the Bill will achieve the opposite. It will encourage high salaries, professional politicians and party apparatchiks but discourage the apolitical volunteer. It will create two classes of councillor: the executive and the rest; the political insider and the volunteer outsider. In short, it is a Bill that centralises. It vests power in local parties, encourages secrecy and deters participation.

Mr. Campbell: May I give the hon. Gentleman an example? Labour-dominated Blyth council in my constituency operates the cabinet system. All the minutes are free for the public, councillors who are not sitting on the cabinet and the press. Cabinet meetings are totally open to anyone who wants to sit there and listen; so are the council and all the scrutiny committees. If that is not openness, what is?

Mr. Norman: The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me. With proper safeguards on openness, publication of agendas and pre-scrutiny, the system can be made to work.

Sir Paul Beresford: Perhaps we should use the example of Hammersmith and Fulham council, where the leader made it clear that the Labour group had decisions given to it by leaders of the group. Decisions were made in the Labour group. They were put through on the executive and rammed through the scrutiny committee. That is not openness.

Mr. Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Such safeguards are not adequately built into the Bill. It centralises, does nothing to address the real problems of decentralisation in local government and vests powers in local parties and political cliques.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: I will not.

The Bill encourages secrecy and deters participation. Then, tacked on to its end, there is the abolition of section 28.

Let me be clear: Conservative Members recognise the need to maintain an attitude of tolerance in our local councils and schools and to maintain a culture of respect for all, no matter what their background, life style or sexual preference. However, section 28 has to be seen against the background of a widespread desire to promote family values and the need to educate all our children on the importance of good parenting in our society. The debate in another place highlighted the fact that those concerns are shared across the whole political spectrum. Church leaders—from the Archbishop of Canterbury to Cardinal Winning and the Chief Rabbi—business men and politicians of all parties have expressed those concerns.

The Government's dogged determination to persevere reflects a dog in the manger attitude and a determination not to listen but to put political correctness over the fears of parents and community leaders. It matters not whether governors of schools have the ultimate right to determine what is taught, concerned parents and council tax payers simply fail to see why taxpayers' money and resources should be used to promote any particular minority life style. That is the issue, and that is what section 28 is about. We regret that the Minister has said that the Government are yet again simply not prepared to listen.

[Mr. Norman]

The strength of British local government has been its flexibility, openness, ability to adapt to the requirements of different communities, and encouragement of voluntary participation by men and women of ability. I therefore hope that, in her reply, the Minister will answer very fully the questions that were not answered in the opening speech.

How will the Bill, in practice, protect against the concentration of power in the hands of narrow cliques of party-selected politicians? How will it prevent a cloud of secrecy descending on local council decisions? How will it help accountability? Why does it not provide for pre-scrutiny before decisions are taken?

How will the Bill's provisions be paid for, given that the Local Government Association has already estimated that they will cost £150 million? What will it do to bring back to participation in local government ordinary people seeking to dedicate their spare time to local communities? When will the Government start to live up to their promise of less centralisation and reverse the tide of red tape and regulation on house building, planning and how councils spend their money? What can be done to give communities once again a real sense of ownership of their neighbourhoods and the power to shape and determine their future?

The Government have failed to live up to their promises. That is why I urge hon. Members to vote for the reasoned amendment.

5.43 pm

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): I think that every Labour Member—and, I hope, every Opposition Member—recognises that the Government's aims to provide more efficient and better local government and particularly to promote greater understanding of what local government is doing among people, and more intelligent participation and involvement in it, are laudable and something to which everyone can subscribe.

The Minister very generously gave way in her speech. I can seldom remember a Minister speaking on Second Reading who has been so prepared to engage in debate and to take on board hon. Members' concerns. She and her Department deserve great credit for that generosity, which indicates the openness with which she will approach the overall subject. However, her generosity allowed grave concern on one matter to be revealed very clearly on both sides of the House.

Under the Bill's provisions, people will have less knowledge about what is going on in local government, less access to information and less involvement in local government. That cannot be, and quite clearly is not, what the Government want. I hope that, during scrutiny in the House, the Government will recognise that the Bill works against the grain of what they are seeking to achieve. The Minister knows the Bill only too well, so there is no need to rehearse all the areas that reinforce that point.

Although the full council will be in public—as has been said—cabinet and cabinet bodies will not be required under clause 21 to meet in public, and will have to publish decisions only after they are made. Mayors also will be outside the scope of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985. Similarly, executives will not have to meet in public and cannot be required to do so by the full council—an extraordinary provision. Also, they will have to publish only after decisions have been made.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell) said in a good intervention, those provisions do not prevent good practice by individual councils. However, the point of legislation is that it sets a benchmark for what has to be done. Many councils will not follow the lead of his council's good, open practice. Many will follow the lead of the Bill, and say that they can operate in private. In many ways, that makes for easier and faster decision making and the avoidance of problems for councillors. The temptation will be enormous, and the Bill—as it is drafted at the moment—will give full rein to those seeking secrecy.

Executives will be able to decide for themselves, which means that the present duties on councils to take decisions in public may change. The duties were introduced in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960—proposed, amazingly, by Baroness Thatcher when she was a Member of Parliament—which gave a great deal of openness to local government. It is a great pity that when she became Prime Minister, she forgot the democratic and open instinct that led her to introduce, as a private Member's Bill, a good piece of legislation. All credit to her as a Back-Bench Member; I wish that she had continued in that way when she was Prime Minister.

The public will lose their right to involvement and participation in decisions before they are made. That very popular former Member of this House, Robin Squire, introduced a Bill which became the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985. It is important to remember that those are rights that the public have enjoyed to call bodies to account and to get access to information. The Bill will bypass those rights, which will not exist unless we can amend it, as we ought to.

The Freedom of Information Bill—which we debated at great length and not entirely happily last week—applies to local authorities, but sadly does not help much in this respect. Under the Bill, information can be withheld if, in the authority's reasonable opinion, disclosure would prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs. That is a powerful inhibition to open government and the right of people to know what is going on. The implication is that the Freedom of Information Bill gives legal weight to an authority's opinion in a way that is remarkable and extremely regrettable. It will create a new cloak of secrecy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) has said.

The Bill in its present form is deficient and will lead to more closed, less well-informed and less informative local government, but all is not lost. It is up to this House to make changes. Cabinets and executives can meet in public, and should be made to do so by amendments to the Bill; that is, unless there is confidential or exempt material that cannot be disclosed. That has always been the case. That provision should be put in the Bill. I hope that the Minister and the Secretary of State will listen to the debate and recognise that there is great concern inside and outside this House. We want open local government, and if the Bill said that cabinets and executives had to meet in public, that would be a big step. Similarly, reports,

the factual information on which decisions are based, options and recommendations should be made public before information is exempt.

Ms Armstrong: It is in the Bill.

Mr. Fisher: I suspect that the Minister knows the Bill better than I do, but I cannot see any strengthening of openness provisions.

What I am asking for can and must be achieved. We cannot let the Bill pass from this Chamber in its closed state. If we can include provisions for the open local government that we need for the next generation, we shall have done something good.

5.50 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), who has made a valuable contribution to our deliberations in the past few weeks, not least in his valiant efforts on freedom of information. I am pleased that he continued that theme in his speech on this Bill. I agree with every word that he uttered.

We are in a unique and, I suspect, somewhat bizarre situation. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) has made it clear that he is deeply concerned about many aspects of the Bill. Judging from the interventions from several of his hon. Friends, I suspect that he was speaking on behalf of all of them. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central—and every Labour Back Bencher who has intervened—highlighted concerns about various aspects of the Bill. Like all my Liberal Democrat colleagues, I have many reservations about the Bill. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where are they?"] So keen are my hon. Friends on the importance of local government that they are out campaigning. Every hon. Member who has spoken, including the Minister, voiced deep concerns about various aspects of the Bill. She said—I think that I quote her correctly—that the Bill is not in the form that the Government wish to see it in.

We are in a difficult position, because we have to decide whether we want to give the Bill a Second Reading. I should make it clear at the outset that, while I have deep concerns about a number of aspects of the Bill, I shall vote for a Second Reading in the hope—I suspect that many others share this hope—that we shall be able to make several amendments during the Bill's later stages.

Above all, I hope that the amended Bill will help to bridge the growing gulf between politicians and the people whom they represent. Sadly, people often no longer trust politicians. They certainly do not join political parties. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has more members than all three major political parties put together. Although there are some notable exceptions, that gulf is as true in local government as in other tiers of government. The turnout for local government elections is testimony to that problem. People value the services provided by local government, but they do not believe that councillors have enough power to do much about them. I very much hope that the Bill will play a part in reconnecting the people to the politicians who seek to represent them.

We have considerable sympathy with various provisions in the Bill and support them fully. The proposed new powers of well-being, the proposed ethical arrangements and the replacement of surcharging—the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells acknowledged that point—are sensible moves in the right direction. The hon. Gentleman and I disagree on the plans, held up by a decision in another place, to repeal section 28, because the Liberal Democrats support those plans. We also support the arrangements to enable the giving of powers to area committees.

However, like every hon. Member who has spoken, we have several areas of considerable concern, not least the number of new powers being given to the Secretary of State, particularly his ability to limit significantly the scope of the new well-being powers. We are particularly concerned about the excessive prescription of matters that are best left to local determination. If the proposals for new structures of local government are not amended, they will concentrate too much power in the hands of a few individuals. Despite what the Minister says, they will create divisions between two ranks of councillor and, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central has said, will reverse the recent huge strides in opening up local government decision-making processes.

When the Bill hit the headlines, all the talk was about mayors and cabinets. The Government were embarrassed by some old Labour councils such as Doncaster and began to find that other Labour heartland councils, such as Liverpool, Sheffield and Islington, were being taken over by the Liberal Democrats. They were desperately keen to find a new, streamlined look for some of their councils.

The public want local councils with the power to make decisions about issues of concern to local people. They are not interested in the fancy wrapping of the council, they just want to know that it is able to get on and make the necessary decisions and has the cash to back them up. People know that, at the moment, their local council has neither the power nor the cash to make a real difference. The bulk of cash for local government comes from Whitehall. Central Government are calling the shots.

I welcome the last-minute conversion of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells to a belief in freeing up local government, but I hope that he acknowledges that the previous Conservative Government stripped away many local government powers. The sad truth is that the Labour Government have continued that trend. Councillors no longer have room for manoeuvre, because ever more decisions are pre-empted by diktat from Whitehall. Ever more local government funding comes as specific grants. Councils get the cash only if they agree to spend it in the way that the Government tell them. We have also seen the massive introduction of a bidding process for specific grants, which takes up a great deal of officers' time. More often than not, they are disappointed. Research figures show that only one third of all bids made for specific funds are successful. That means that two thirds of the bids are unsuccessful. All that officer and member time is wasted.

The target-setting process is a further example of that centralisation by a Labour Government. Target after target is being imposed on local government. Target-setting can have value and improve the management process, but it is getting ludicrously out of hand. The ultimate in the ludicrous situation that we have reached is that, having imposed targets on local government, central Government throw them in the dustbin. Anyone wanting evidence of that need only look at the written answer that I received from the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), on 2 December last year to a question about targets. She said:

[Mr. Don Foster]

Details of any targets agreed with local government are not held centrally—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 273W.]

The implication is that the Government do not even know what targets they have set for local government. If Whitehall is known to pull all the strings, people will not bother to vote for the puppets. We must free local government if people are to regain an interest and involvement in local government.

Maria Eagle: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that his party's policy is to raise more finance locally instead of the Government handing over money to local government from the centre? Is he suggesting that that should be done through the council tax?

Mr. Foster: The answer to the hon. Lady's question is yes. It is Liberal Democrat policy to rearrange local government finance so that a greater proportion of the money spent locally is raised locally. At the moment, some 80 per cent. of the money spent locally comes from Government funds. That is wrong and we need to reduce the amount of money raised through income tax and increase the amount raised through local taxation. That is a clearly stated party policy—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) is excited by it, I will happily ensure that he receives a copy.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): For the sake of clarity, will the hon. Gentleman tell the House whether it is Liberal Democrat policy to put a penny on income tax and a penny on local government taxes?

Mr. Foster: I do not wish to delay the House for too long, but the hon. Gentleman confuses two separate issues. The Liberal Democrats believed that the Chancellor was wrong to reduce the level of income tax, because that money would have been better spent on improving public services such as education, health and support for pensions. The hon. Gentleman disagreed with us and voted with the Chancellor. The issue of the funding of local government is separate. Local government funding should be arranged so that more of the money that is spent locally is raised locally. The quid pro quo is a reduction in the amount of money raised through central taxation.

Dr. Whitehead: Is there not a contradiction between the Liberal Democrats' demand that the Government do not cut taxes but increase public spending, which mostly goes through local government, and his idea that local government should be responsible for raising its funds and should not receive grants from the Government?

Mr. Foster: I suspect that we are straying a long way from the Bill, but if the hon. Gentleman wants the full text of our policy, I would be happy to send it to him. We make it easy for the hon. Gentleman because we suggest that money should be collected locally through a form of local income tax, not through the council tax arrangements.

The most important part of the Bill is not part II, which has been the subject of most controversy, but part I, which gives additional powers to local government in respect of the so-called powers of well-being. We have long thought that local government should be given a power of general competence. In other words, local councils would be able to do all those things that they felt were in the interests of local people, except for some things that were specifically prohibited. In part I, the Government have gone a long way in that direction and we welcome that. However, we are concerned that the Bill will still give the Secretary of State significant ability to limit those arrangements. We are also concerned that the Bill contains no mechanism to allow local councils to raise funds to pay for those activities that they develop within the new power. I hope that we will debate those issues further in Committee.

I also hope that the Minister will acknowledge that arising from that power is the ability to produce community strategies and plans, which is also contained in part I. She will be aware that local government has to produce many different plans. In some cases, local authorities have to produce as many as 40 different plans, including economic development plans, civil defence plans, air quality management plans, youth justice plans, community safety plans—the list goes on. We hope that, in Committee, it will be possible to table amendments to ensure that, when a local council develops a community plan under part I, it will be able to integrate within that plan many of the other plans. The Minister is aware that, to achieve that, we would need to change the power to a duty, and I am delighted that she acknowledged that the Government intend to table amendments to that effect.

I hope also that the Minister will be willing to accept amendments that deal with the thorny issue of quangos. As we try to achieve joined-up government at local and regional level, it is vital that we find more effective ways to get local government and the various quangos to work together. That is missing in the current arrangements and is not referred to in the Bill.

Part II has been the most controversial. It is true that many councils need to streamline their decision making. Many councils have already made radical changes without legislation forcing them to do so, but the Government now want to force on all councils one of only three models. We recognise that those three models are more flexible than many people have given them credit for, but—despite the Minister's protestations—any one of the models could lead to the creation of two ranks of councillor. They could also concentrate power in the hands of too few people. All councillors should be able to represent the views of their communities equally, and we do not want to see standard-class councillors and first-class councillors.

Pilots of the models have been carried out, and the evidence in some cases shows disillusionment among the back-bench councillors. It is therefore important to recognise the pressure for a fourth option or a locally determined option. With good will on both sides, it would be possible to develop such an option in Committee, based on Baroness Hamwee's amendment in the other place. That amendment sought to provide a locally determined option that is nevertheless based on several key principles, including the vital importance of scrutiny, accountability, openness, transparency and efficiency. I hope that we will have the opportunity to develop that issue in Committee.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in Wales, we have the ideal method of developing local options, because the National Assembly could develop a set of options that took into account the unique circumstances of Welsh local government?

Mr. Foster: I agree entirely, and several amendments will be needed in respect of the arrangements for Wales.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central rightly raised another concern about the executive models in part II. Liberal Democrats and others have worked hard in local authorities throughout the country to move them out of the dark ages. We have fought for meetings to be held in public, for the public's right to speak or to present petitions and for papers to be available to all councillors and the public in advance of meetings. The Bill's provision to allow executives the option—I accept that some will choose not to take advantage of it—to meet in secret would take us back to those dark ages and is a recipe for concealment and corruption.

Open access to all papers in advance of meetings is crucial. How will other councillors, the public and partner organisations know that they need to lobby executive members if they do not know in advance what will be discussed and when? Publishing decisions after the event is not adequate.

Parts III, IV and V are much less controversial than parts I and II. We would like to see changes to those parts and we shall introduce amendments in Committee. Part V involves the vital issue of section 28. I wish to make it absolutely clear on behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends that we are opposed to the section. We welcome the new guidance that is being proposed by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, but we believe that section 28 must be repealed. We shall give our support to any measures that the Government feel should be taken to ensure that that is done.

Much in the Bill needs to be amended to give real powers, including fund-raising powers, to local government. Local government should be given real choices and be subject to less prescription to ensure that there is no return to the dark ages of decisions being taken in secret. We must ensure that the work of all councillors is equally valued. Above all, we must set local councils free so that they can truly serve and meet the needs of local people. As I have said, it is with some difficulty, but in the hope that, with amendments, the Bill can move us in that direction, that we shall support Second Reading.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that there is a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench Members' speeches.

6.11 pm

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I think that we all recognise the huge contribution that local authorities have made to the community, and the proud tradition of many authorities. In recognising the need for change and revitalisation, it is important also to recognise the tremendous good work that the authorities have done in their present form.

The Cardiff local authority started street lighting services. At one time, it had its own electricity company. It introduced a trolley service and bus services. All those vital services are an important part of our lives. Local authorities have provided community leadership, and I welcome the extended powers in the Bill that will enable them to continue to do so.

As my right hon. Friend Minister for Local Government and the Regions said when opening the debate, the Bill applies to England and Wales. There are separate clauses for Wales that specify that the National Assembly for Wales has the powers of the Secretary of State in England.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): Does the hon. Lady think that the council tax payers of Cardiff are getting the best possible value in paying £58,500 to the leader of that council?

Ms Morgan: Probably not. The Assembly has considered the issue and has given the leader of the local authority a deadline to reduce the allowances. I agree with its recommendations.

The relationship between the Assembly and local government in Wales is unique, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) mentioned earlier in an intervention. During the devolution campaign, the referendum and the vote last May, one of the big fears expressed by local authorities, councillors and supporters of local authority government was that devolution would take powers up from local authorities rather than bringing them down from Westminster. It was therefore built into the devolution settlement that the Assembly would work with local government and would not take work from it. The Government of Wales Act 1998 specified that a partnership council should be established. That council has been set up and it is meeting regularly. Local government in Wales is already working with the Assembly through the partnership council to develop Assembly statutory guidance on part II.

There is a unique situation in Wales because of the creation of the Assembly and the fact that local government is bound to be closer to people's lives on a day-to-day basis than the Assembly and central Government. We have an opportunity to show our confidence in local government and to work as much as possible via local authorities. The function of central Government in Wales is not to take over the functions of local government. It is significant that a substantial amount of the extra education money in Wales has gone to local authorities and not direct to schools. Direct provision is not seen as feasible in Wales and it is not being attempted. The situation is different in Wales, and we must accept that, with devolution, there will be different solutions in different parts of the country.

In principle, the Welsh Local Government Association accepts the case for a separation of powers with the creation of an executive that will be separate from the council. As my right hon. Friend the Minister said, councils are experimenting, and 12 councils are doing so in Wales. Another seven have plans to do so. There seems to be no interest among the councils in having directly elected mayors. I do not know whether that feeling is reflected by the public. Most authorities are thinking of a cabinet model. The Cardiff local authority has a cabinet of seven and an executive of 20. I do not know whether that is unique.

Cabinet and executive models throw up problems over the role of non-executive councillors. There is a danger that a divide will be created, which might be made worse by the payment proposals of some authorities. It is difficult to see how back-bench councillors will take part in policy making. Scrutiny is vital and that process gives

[Ms Morgan]

a tremendous role to councillors, but it is important for every councillor to have an opportunity to participate in policy making. That may be possible via the scrutiny role, and it needs to be spelt out to local councillors that that might happen.

Ms Armstrong: The overall policy of the council is the responsibility of the whole council and not of the executive. The executive's role is to implement, and to take decisions that are required to implement the overall policy.

Ms Morgan: I thank my right hon. Friend for that information.

There has been much criticism about the plethora of committees and sub-committees that have characterised local government. I served as a councillor for 12 years and I spent a lot of time on various sub-committees, committees and working groups. I suppose that many of the individuals and groups involved spent an inordinate amount of time sitting in committee. However, many of them made important decisions. They co-opted people who had experience of receiving the council's services. I initiated a child care strategy and a local authority nursery via those committees, which may not feature in the future structure. At a recent women's conference that I attended in Wales, representatives of all four political parties regretted the loss of those committees and groups. They felt that they provided an opportunity to learn, and opportunities, particularly for women, to become involved in local government on first becoming councillors.

There is a lack of women's representation. Women are not very well represented in this place, but in local government there is a huge problem. Local government will never really be credible until it is more representative of the public that it serves, and that relates particularly to women. I hope that, in the consultation period and the processes that may arise as a result of the Bill, there will be opportunities to address this issue.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) has recently produced a report entitled "Democratic Deficit 2000", which highlights the under-representation of women in local government. It asked whether there would be any women mayors and how many women would be in the cabinets. In my own local authority of Cardiff, three of the seven cabinet members are women. There are 17 men and one woman in the executive, and four men and one woman chair the five scrutiny committees. Although 32 per cent. of Cardiff's councillors are women, most are not in positions of power. Women account for only 24 per cent. of councillors in Wales. It is important that the Bill does not reinforce women's absence from decision-making positions.

I hope that the consultation process, and the Bill itself, will encourage councillors to ask themselves why so few women are involved. Will the models adopted by the Bill make it easier for women to participate? What will councils do to make participation easier? I welcome the Bill's recommendation for carers' allowances, as there is no doubt that the lack of arrangements for people with caring responsibilities is one of the reasons why women have not been fully involved in local politics.

Clearly, the ultimate power of scrutiny and control of councils and councillors resides with the electorate. I hope that some of the changes in the Bill to make elections more frequent will help make local government more relevant to people's lives. There is no doubt that the abysmal turnout in local elections shows that something must be done about local government.

I hope that the Bill will revitalise local government. Ultimately, the electorate will let us know how they feel about the standard of councils.

6.22 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I am pleased to have the opportunity to take part in the debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan), whose enthusiasm for, and experience in, local government shone through her contribution. It was interesting to hear her description of the links that have been made between the Welsh Assembly and existing local government in Wales.

As always, it was good to hear the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), who was mercifully brief, unlike some of his colleagues—but they are not present this afternoon. It was especially interesting to hear the thoughtful contribution from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher). I hope that the Minister took careful note of the points that he made.

We heard a great deal from the Minister about the Government's enthusiasm for local government and its autonomy. However, the contributions made by hon. Members of all parties show that not everyone is certain that the Bill is the best illustration of that enthusiasm. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) said, local government is important to people and communities. It is important to communities because it is a vital strand of the democratic process, because its decisions are closest to the people whom they affect, and because it delivers services that are important to everyone—literally, from cradle to grave.

Local government is also important because when it is efficient, accountable, transparent and truly autonomous, it can play a role in limiting big, central Government. However, despite its importance, electoral turnouts show that people are apathetic towards local government, as the hon. Member for Cardiff, North noted.

Like their predecessors over many decades, the Government want to counter that apathy, and the Bill and other measures are the means that they have chosen to achieve that. In the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions press notice of 26 November last year, Ministers stated that the Bill was part of the Government's agenda to

> revitalise local democracy and modernise public services.

The Minister used a similar phrase earlier this afternoon. The press notice also advanced the hope that the provisions in the Bill would make

> councils more efficient, transparent and accountable.

There is some way to go before that is achieved. Keith Lucas and Richards point to part of the reason for that in their "History of Local Government in the Twentieth Century", when they state:

> At no stage of English history has any Government held a consistent and logical policy on the range of limits of municipal services. Local government was not evolved to provide a

co-ordinated system of administration for a logically defined range of services; it emerged, piecemeal, in answer to a succession of separate needs and demands.

Everyone interested in local government would agree with that analysis. It has been the task of successive Governments to try to put the deficiency right, but they have all had to start with an unsatisfactory patchwork. There has been no Napoleonic tendency in this country.

However, people value the services provided by local government. A MORI poll conducted for the Local Government Association in spring 1999 found that although people believe that local government services are important to their lives, they are unclear about who is responsible for which services, and who should be held accountable for what.

For example, the survey showed that people understood that street sweeping, refuse collection and—interestingly enough—the library service were provided at local level, but that they were vague about other provision such as education and social services. That is partly because a succession of central Governments—not just this one and their predecessor—have regarded local government as the vehicle for their own initiatives. Circular 10/65, the Housing Finance Act 1972 and the Rates Act 1984 come to mind in that regard.

This Government came to power full of the good intentions expressed in their 1997 election manifesto, which stated:

Local decision making should be less constrained by central government and also more accountable to local people.

From the contributions that we have heard so far from hon. Members of all parties, I think that we would all agree with that.

However, what is the reality, as opposed to what some people might call the Bill's pious intentions? Does the Bill tackle the real reasons for public apathy towards local government and all its works? Does it grasp the opportunity of its own existence?

The Bill's proposals must first be set against the context created by the Government. The hon. Member for Bath mentioned some of the relevant points. For example, in 1999–2000, local councils must produce no fewer than 26 "Plans"—with a capital "P"—outlining their response to Government-set priorities. They are to produce 124 Audit Commission performance indicators, and 43 quality protects indicators for children's social services. In addition, the Department of Health has produced 48 performance indicators, covering the whole range of public services.

The time taken by local authorities on such work can be imagined, but the use to which all the information would be put is less easily grasped—although the hon. Member for Bath has told us that it is often destined for the dustbin. I hope that he is not right, but it is hard to see how a Government elected on the promise that local decision making

should be less constrained by central government

can justify the degree of central control that the Bill will impose.

Mrs. Ellman: Am I correct in believing that the right hon. Lady at one time advocated the total removal of responsibility for education from local authorities? Is she still of that opinion? Would she like the Bill to include provision to achieve that removal?

Mrs. Shephard: I believe, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer apparently does, that money is well handled at local level by schools. I do not remember the hon. Lady challenging the right hon. Gentleman on that point when he made his Budget statement.

As the hon. Member for Bath said, the work of local government has been overlapped, if not undermined, by the sheer number of quangos and executive agencies. At present, there are 6,500 quangos—the number is rising—and 238 executive agencies. There are also 708 executive non-departmental bodies.

Moreover, the Government's rush to constitutional reform has further blurred the accountability of local government. The plans for the governance of London illustrate the point. London has 32 boroughs and the Corporation of London. The mayor and the Greater London Authority will be superimposed on the local government system. Some of its members will represent constituencies of 500,000; others will have Londonwide responsibilities. In addition, the people of London will of course continue to vote for Westminster Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament. They will also have the services of the London regional development agency, the Government office for London, the police authority, a fire and emergency planning authority and a culture and arts commission.

However, what the people of London will not know—the Bill will not help them—is where to turn when there is a hole in the road. That is the simple test of accountability, without which local government will continue to be regarded with scepticism and apathy. No amount of electoral gimmicks or quick fixes will deal with the basic problems of local government, not all of which are of this Government's making. The legacy is of long standing. However, the Government undertook to solve problems that the Bill not only does not solve, but exacerbates.

I wish to deal briefly with the proposals for the new management structures. Do they address the problem of accountability? Do they make for greater transparency? Will they create more interest in local government? Do they demonstrate the Government's stated intention in their manifesto to make local government more accountable to local people? The Bill fails those important tests. It is a mockery that a Bill claiming to make local government more accountable to local people denies local people the choice of retaining the management structures they already have if that is what they prefer. How can Ministers, aware of their manifesto commitment, maintain that the only acceptable executive arrangements are those which they have devised in Whitehall, rather than those devised by local people? Why will they not have real confidence, and allow accountable elected local people to propose their own executive arrangements which, in their view and in the view of those whom they represent, are workable in their areas?

I have listened very carefully to what the Minister has said on this point. She seems to think that a committee system is, by definition, outdated. "Outdated" is her stock epithet. How sure is she that in a county council with a cabinet and executive system all the skills, knowledge and expertise of, say, 80 members are used to the full? I accept that in a smaller council, it may be easier to ensure the involvement of everybody, because everybody will have great knowledge of a small area. However, to exclude a large number of councillors in a large county is a waste of human potential.

The Government view, as stated in their press notice of 26 November, is clear. They want

[Mrs. Shephard]

to create dynamic local government that listens to what people really want—how they want to be governed and how they want their services to be delivered.

However, people will not be empowered by the Bill to say how they want to be governed unless their view happens to coincide with what the Government decree.

The Minister said in support of her cause that many local authorities have introduced the new arrangements ahead of legislation. She must know, but perhaps will not say, that as local authorities know that they will be obliged to do so, they might as well get on with it. Compliance under the cosh is not a cause for self-congratulation on the part of those holding the cosh. Although some cabinet and leader arrangements are working well and democratically, there are some awkward contrasts regarding transparency and fairness.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell), who is no longer in his place, cite the good example of his local council. In Norfolk, the Conservative-controlled Breckland district council, with its balanced cabinet of four Conservative, three Labour and two Independent members, makes an interesting contrast with the Lib-Lab-controlled Norfolk county council. Seven of its nine cabinet members are Labour and two are Liberal, and eight members represent urban wards. The Conservative opposition, of course, was not invited to take part.

Sadly, Norfolk is not exceptional. According to the House of Commons Library figures, taken from an article in *The Independent*, in more than 60 per cent. of councils with a cabinet system, only the ruling political party is represented, and more decisions are taken in private. Such points have been raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House and I hope that the Minister will take careful note of them. She has clarified the Government's position on these matters, and I expect them to be further explored in Committee.

I cannot believe that the Minister intends to leave openness in large areas of decision making to the discretion of the new executives and remove the duties on local authorities to take decisions in public. Notwithstanding the Minister's clarification, the Bill produces the curious anomaly that local councils cannot choose the mechanisms by which they take decisions, but can choose to take them in secret. That seems a curious set of priorities and is difficult to square with the Government's avowed intention to create effective, democratic government which, as the DETR press notice says:

relies on the bond of trust between the people and those who represent them . . .

Let us see the Bill demonstrate that intent.

The Minister will have noted the misgivings expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Of course there is agreement on other aspects of the Bill, but the problems of local government are fundamental and of long standing. Sadly, unless the Bill is greatly amended, it represents a wasted opportunity.

6.36 pm

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): I am grateful to have an opportunity to speak in the debate and to follow the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard). I am glad that so many women are speaking in the debate. Those of us who have been excluded in one way or another from central Government over the years—not for too much longer, I hope—have often found a place in local authorities. I do not speak of myself in this instance—I have never been a councillor.

I should like to concentrate on part II on governance arrangements, as many right hon. and hon. Members have also done. The city of Liverpool, a part of which I have the honour to represent, has had a long-standing problem of inadequate civic leadership. That is why I am interested in part II. Like many fellow citizens, I have had a long-standing interest in trying to put this right. My memory of politics in Liverpool goes back about 30 years, and I do not recall having any other opportunity to try to get things right. It is very important that local authorities, cities and other administrative areas with problems now get this right.

Liverpool has had 30 years of missed opportunities and poor civic leadership—my remarks are not aimed at any one political party, as they have all had a go in that time—but the result is that Liverpool, one of our greatest cities, has been unable to fulfil its potential. I hope that the Bill will assist in enabling Liverpool, which is moving into the 21st century with hope and ambition, to fulfil its potential at last, and to become what it should be—a great modern city.

The ideas in the Bill have been seized on in Liverpool. Many right hon. and hon. Members may think of Liverpool as a backward-looking place, but in fact it is very forward looking. There has been a major debate in Liverpool for the past two years about how to improve and modernise local government to ensure that the city can fulfil its potential.

The document "Local Leadership, Local Choice" was published in March last year. Since then, a debate has raged about how the ideas that it contains can be adopted to make Liverpool a better place. The Liverpool democracy commission, which was established in March 1999, finished its work in July 1999. It is a unique commission. I do not know of any other city or local authority area setting up an independent commission to consider how to improve governance. It was chaired by a well-respected local business man, James Ross of Littlewoods, and its membership included local parliamentarians of all parties, academics, business people, Church leaders and media figures.

The commission took oral and written evidence from anyone who cared to present it, including local organisations, individuals and those who had been involved in governance, local and national. It held meetings and consultations. Debates were held across various branches of the media—radio and local television—and it also commissioned polling; so I can safely say that we know very well what people in Liverpool think about what they have.

The commission made some recommendations, but in a sense they are not the important thing. What was revealing was the generalised will among all political parties, all types of business people and all organisations to see change. The conclusions were interesting. Only 2 per cent. of people polled thought that the council was doing a good job. Some of us who have been in Liverpool and represented it in various ways for many years thought that 2 per cent. was quite a high figure. Sixty-nine per cent. were willing to say that they were dissatisfied.

It was also apparent that the council was unable to represent the city to the outside world. In the modern era, that is increasingly necessary to improve the city and to bring inward investment and new people and jobs to the city. Local and civic governors need to be able to represent themselves to the outside world. Only 15 per cent. of people asked thought that the city council was either good or excellent at doing that; 75 per cent. thought that it was not.

One of the other major issues about which people are concerned is value for money in local government. Only 8 per cent. of people thought that the council gave value for money. Again, some of us were surprised at how high that figure was—certainly judging by my surgeries. I accept that the 8 per cent. probably never come to see me. Also, 90 per cent. of those asked could not identify even one of their local councillors. That is a damning indictment of the existing system. If those councillors had a defined role and were able to carry it out, in a way that local people could understand or tap into, more people would certainly be able to identify them.

The system is not good for councillors either. Evidence was given to the commission that many felt excluded, bewildered, unable to do a good job or not sure what the job that they were supposed to be doing was. One, Councillor Bostock, said:

> I did four years on the council and it did my head in.

Mercifully for him, he is no longer a councillor, but when someone voluntarily puts in four years of their time and effort and that is the outcome, it reflects something wrong with the system. So perhaps it is no wonder that the average turnout in Liverpool wards is now below 25 per cent. in local elections. It is no wonder that in some wards in the city the turnout is as low as 10 per cent. It is no wonder that in the north end of the city in the Melrose by-election within the past two years, the turnout fell to 6 per cent. That cannot be good for local democracy. It requires a change.

Something needs to be done—perhaps a mayor is the answer. That debate was raging two years ago in Liverpool and it still rages. There is already speculation about who the candidates might be. I shall not add to that speculation except to say that the Liverpool Labour party, for one, will have an excellent local candidate.

The poll conducted by the Liverpool democracy commission also asked people whether they would like to have a mayor, and 63 per cent. of those asked said that they would. Only 20 per cent. were unsure and 16 per cent. were against. There is a great will to change what we have. All types of people and stakeholders in Liverpool are dissatisfied with the present arrangements.

However, we must make sure that the new arrangements are better. That has come through in the debate this afternoon. There has to be a hard separation between the executive and scrutiny functions. Any of the models in the Bill can provide that, but the Government need to make very sure that that is what happens when the new structures are adopted.

I want to use the example of Liverpool to show what can go wrong. While the Liverpool democracy commission was doing its work between March and July 1999, the city council, now controlled by the Liberal Democrats, sprang into action and decided that it would pre-empt the commission's findings and move straight to some new structures. They had just taken control and they wanted to make a mark, which is fair enough. They established a cabinet with a leader, all the members of which were from one party. They established scrutiny committees led by back benchers and area committees based more or less on a ward or a small cluster of wards, which theoretically enabled local people to deal with local issues and become more involved.

However, even though a massive debate was going on in Liverpool at the time, the county council consulted no one about precisely what arrangements it intended to establish. The result is a mess. Whether it is a deliberately contrived mess or has become a mess because the flaws of the system adopted have been exploited by the ruling group, I shall leave the electorate to decide on 4 May.

I shall use one illustration from my constituency of the consequences of the new system. The Liberal Democrat-run council has just announced the closure of Alderwood primary school in Speke. There were undoubtedly problems of poor teaching and a lack of grip by the governors and the local education authority, which meant that there were justifiable concerns about standards, but the council announced the closure to a local newspaper before it even told parents, governors or children. The story was telephoned through to the reporter by the Liberal Democrat chairman of the lifelong learning committee—the scrutiny committee. In other words, the chair of the scrutiny committee announced the council's policy to the local newspaper. What confidence can parents have that that scrutiny committee will organise proper scrutiny of a decision that he has announced?

That thought occurred to colleagues in the Labour group so they put that question to the leader of the council. They asked:

> Will the Leader of the Council state how the Chair of the Lifelong Learning Select Committee is meant to have any credibility in performing scrutiny of the Executive when he is quoted as announcing the administration's policies to the press?

Good question; and the answer was:

> He has obviously taken lessons from the Labour Party. Oh Dear!

That was not an adequate answer from the leader of the council.

The closure was then designated by the executive as a ward issue, which in the new structure means that, despite the fact that a citywide review of surplus primary places is being conducted—of which the closure should surely be a part because there are surplus places in Speke—the decision can be called in to be scrutinised only by the local ward councillors, who all happen to be Liberal Democrat. They are certainly not Labour. A manipulation has taken place that prevented the Labour opposition from calling in the decision for scrutiny, even though the scrutiny would have been led by the man who announced the decision. The decision to close the school has been ratified through the council's rubber-stamp procedure within a week of its being announced, using a process designed to deal with non-controversial issues. The closure of a school is never non-controversial, certainly not for children, parents and governors.

The parents are extremely angry but it is not until tomorrow, after the decision has effectively been made, that the first consultation meeting will take place with those parents. Now, I am not a cynical person, but I think that the decision has already been made—so do the parents. That is not effective local democracy but an abuse of local democracy. I hope that the Government, in taking

[Maria Eagle]

powers to regulate, as they propose in the Bill, will take steps to prevent such Liberal Democrat manipulation in Liverpool and make sure that the executive and scrutiny functions of local councils are well and truly separated. Unless they do that, local people will not have confidence in the new arrangements.

The Bill offers a way forward, but I urge the Government to ensure that the arrangements that are established satisfy its principles, rather than the ambitions of local groups.

6.50 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): May I make a suggestion to the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, who has just left the Chamber? Too often, she makes herself the worst advocate of a reasonable case. Instead of using simple English to explain her intentions, she uses an Orwellian jargon that replaces meaning with slogans. That does not work; it would be better for all of us if she stated directly what she was trying to achieve. We could then understand the good points and disagree with the bad points.

The Minister tried to make a case for change. However, she failed to demonstrate that a new structure was necessary to remedy problems in local government. The new structure will stand as much chance of success or failure as the old one. Structures are not always at the heart of a problem—it is the way people make them work. She failed to show that the existing structures—in the hands of people of efficiency and good will—could not deliver her results just as well as new structures. People who were not efficient, or who did not have good will, would make just as much of a mess under the new structures as they would have done under the old ones.

How should we judge the Bill? We need sensible criteria. Does it promote competent, accountable, accessible local government, with a sustainable and reasonable balance between what central Government require and the independence of local councillors? Such a balance must be achieved. We all know that the Government have requirements and that local government aspires to greater independence. Sensible government will find a way in which those two forces can come to an arrangement.

It would be helpful if we had a clear idea of the Government's view of that relationship. However, their view is disguised by their curious placatory rhetoric and the use of words such as "modernisation". Modernisation is described as though it were a nirvana that we could achieve. It has become a Government mantra, but the word is devoid of any intrinsic meaning.

Will the Bill help in meeting those criteria? The straws in the wind are not good. In the Budget, the number of specific grants increased again. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment told local councils that they had to use that money for the purposes that he specified—irrespective of the principles of hypothecation. However, now there is a review of local government finance. Perhaps that will tell us a little bit about which way the Government are going.

From one of the new Labour think tanks—the new Labour forum, I think—we hear that there is a flirtation with the idea of abolishing local education authorities. That is all part of the front line first project.

In *The Guardian*, Sir Jeremy Beecham—who seems to have been under-rewarded in comparison with some of local government's lesser Labour luminaries—stated that the danger of front line first was that

> it masks a real shift of power away from local government and back to control by Whitehall. We could, unless we are careful, be witnessing the strange death of local democracy . . . the fact is that "frontline first" and the general move toward more ring-fencing of resources are pushing relentlessly in the direction of greater central control.

The latest edition of *Local Government Chronicle*—I am paid to write a column for it, so I declare an interest—states:

> Downing Street, the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health are all expressing interest in radical options to channel funds directly to services without the involvement of local government—so-called "frontline first" funding.
>
> Ideas include giving funds directly to the country's 25,000 schools, and handing care of the elderly to health authorities.
>
> Prime Minister Tony Blair and his advisers believe attacking councils is a vote winner. There is strong and persistent spin coming from Downing Street that Mr Blair wants results and sees local government as bureaucracy standing in the way.

It is not difficult to see why a case will have to be made to convince local government that the Bill is supposed to be for, rather than against, it.

The central problem is that of prescription by central Government. All parties are to blame for that. If it helps hon. Members, I shall say "mea culpa"—as a Local Government Minister, I played my part in that process. We have seen prescription of the means of service delivery and of methods of assessment and testing—with an emphasis on outcomes. There has been a move from compulsory competitive tendering to best value. Those are not opposites, but a continuum—the use of different methods to achieve the same outcome. The prescription is the same.

There has been a move from universal and crude capping to the use of specific and much more severe forms—if the Government choose to exercise the powers that they have taken. There has been widespread creation of inspectors—the new commissars of local government. Many local councillors are now more preoccupied with passing the test with the inspectors than the test with the electors. Under the prescription that is so prevalent, perhaps the inspectorate is in danger of taking over from the electorate.

The Bill has contradictory aspects. There is a credit side. The general power—used sensibly, in the hands of reasonable people—will be of benefit to the community and will enable people to enlarge the partnership that is at the heart of local regeneration. Obviously, the attempt to bring order to ethical standards is important. If we can sort out and clarify the allowances system so that it is transparent and there is common agreement as to what is reasonable, we shall have done local government a service.

However, there is a debit side. The first element of that is the prescription of structures, and the wholesale condemnation of the existing arrangements. It was interesting that the Minister said that she was not an ideologue, but that the present system was insupportable. If that is not an ideological statement, what is? The present system is dismissed, without finding out whether it can be changed or reformed.

An amendment to make that reform possible was tabled in the other place. We hear that moves are afoot to introduce a famous fourth way—I suppose that will be better than the third way. It will be interesting to see

whether a way can be found to give the present system an internal rejuvenation, and whether the Government will be receptive to that. It would be a pity if there were only three choices on the menu.

Another element on the debit side is the curious methodology for referendums. I do not like referendums, especially those with a 5 per cent. threshold and no floor for the number of participants. A 5 per cent. threshold is pretty dismal. However, if the electorate are not sufficiently responsive to the need for change, if that need does not well up in their breast, the Government will take power to cause it to well up by requiring a local referendum. However, at that level a referendum would be a tool of coercion—as the Government are well aware.

The Bill contains ambiguities—for example, on the possibility of more frequent elections. In the original Green Paper, the Government referred to the imposition of annual elections—presumably, they did not want councillors to sleep easy in their beds at night, because they would have to keep looking over their shoulders at the electors. The Government retain the power to impose elections by order, although the method is not specified in the Bill.

If the Government really do not want councillors to sleep easy—if they really want to introduce an instrument that, they hope, will threaten the monolithic majorities in certain areas—there is an obvious answer. They should introduce proportional representation in local government. That would do the trick—whether we like it or not. That would deliver the result far more effectively than the Government's clumsy proposals.

There could be ambiguity in the relationship between directly elected mayors—if we take that route—and directly elected service chiefs. That is possible under the Bill. I cannot imagine a greater recipe for incoherence than to have people with separate mandates pursuing an allegedly common policy. I cannot understand how that would deliver joined-up government—one of the preoccupations of the Labour Administration.

As others have said, it is difficult to imagine the role of councillors in scrutiny mode. All parties have problems attracting candidates to local government. If we are honest, we must admit that we all scratch around to find candidates for certain wards. We all win seats in uncontested wards where we have difficulty in putting up candidates. If I tried to persuade someone to stand as a councillor by saying, "Come on Fred, stand for the council—you'll enjoy being a scrutineer", rather than by saying, "You're going to run the council", I should not be greeted with the spontaneous enthusiasm that I normally expect when I ask people to do something on behalf of the party. If we divide the process up between the deciders—those on the inside track, backed up by the officers—and the scrutineers, who will service the scrutineers? There would be a real difficulty.

There is one aspect of the Bill that I am inclined to support even though I realise that I may not be wholly on-message. I am sympathetic to the idea of directly elected mayors. London was a damn silly place to start; having an elected mayor in London who will enjoy fewer powers than any directly elected mayor elsewhere was a pretty silly way to test the concept. I do not think that I will feel a great deal better governed when I wake up on 5 May, whoever has won the election and however I have resolved my personal difficulty about whom to vote for as my second option. I rejoice only in knowing that the Prime Minister probably faces a greater difficulty deciding whom he will vote for as his second choice.

Perhaps, at last, we have a chance to reverse the tide of centralisation that is symbolised by the number of leaders of councils who are now in this place. I can see several sitting on the Labour Benches, and there are no doubt some on the Opposition Benches, too; they have migrated to this place. However, the day that people migrate from this place to local government because they think that that is where real power lies, we will know that we have at last brought about a mechanism that can challenge the complacency and centralising tendencies of Government. On the whole, that would be a good thing, and I am anxious that we should achieve it.

However, the political parties will all receive a nasty shock. People who stand for the post of mayor will not just seek a party mandate; they will want a much wider appeal that goes beyond their party. They will all be off-message, as has been demonstrated by events recently in London. Because they will be held responsible for all services, even the ones that they do not control closely, their necessary tendency will be to seek more power so as to bring reality into line with perception. That will involve interesting chemistry They could seek more power over education. Policing is another obvious example. The man or the lady seeking to be a tough mayor will want to be able to control the police.

The process might be inconvenient, but it is a lot more persuasive than the Government's regional agenda, which is dying on its feet. Its pale ghost—a Banquo's ghost—will appear tonight in the form of the proposal for the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs. Elected mayors could turn out to be the sorcerer's apprentice for that legislation. Once they are unleashed, the Government will find it awfully difficult to put them back in their box. That is why they are a rather good idea.

There will be many unanswered questions. How will an elected mayor relate to elected councillors, and what will their relative powers be? Are we moving towards a gubernatorial system in relation to service inspectors and the role of the mayor? For once, this is an experiment that is worth carrying out.

The Bill offers some possibilities. We can improve it in Committee, and I hope that the Minister does not approach that with the attitude that a light is behind her and that she can stonewall all the questions that are asked. With the majority at her disposal, she will be perfectly able to do that. Instead, I hope that she realises that we all want local government to work, and that in the past, all parties have not delivered to local government the conditions in which it can thrive as it should if we are true believers in representative democracy. As we are in the House, we should at least believe in that.

7.3 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I enjoyed the speech of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) rather more than I did that of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), who opened the debate for the Opposition. He spent 20 minutes trying to tell us that the Tory party was the defender of local government democracy, but it gave us the poll tax, rate capping and, for those of us who were in local government in the 1980s, year after year of cuts in powers

[Mr. Neil Gerrard]

and spending. When we consider the disillusionment in local government, we must remember that a key issue is that of powers. If people do not believe that local government is capable of delivering anything or if those in local government are not able to deliver what they want, that will be a source of much disillusionment.

I want to concentrate my comments on those parts of the Bill that deal with structures. However, much in it is welcome. In particular, I welcome the changes on functions and the ability to promote economic, social and environmental well-being that appear in part I. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Minister said that that will be a duty and not just an enabling power. The abolition of the surcharge is long overdue and I was glad to hear her show in her opening remarks the same strong commitment that she has shown on many occasions in debates on the subject of the repeal of section 28. I welcome the fact that she insisted that that would happen.

I have no difficulty with the idea that we should consider the possibility of structural change in local government. The key questions are what form that change will take and who will decide how it is carried out. To what degree will decisions be made at a national, as opposed to a local, level?

Irrespective of whether there have been experiments in some local authorities, the Bill proposes something very new and different. It proposes the complete separation of the executive function from the scrutiny function. Councillors will have executive powers that they will exercise personally, and that is a completely new concept. If I have understood clause 11(7) correctly, it appears that a range of people with executive powers might be appointed, rather than elected, to the new positions. We are moving to something that is untried and untested in our political system. We must recognise that in the proposals for the executive functions.

Some of the proposals are based on arguments about the failings of the committee system in local government. Sometimes, I have felt that that has been turned into the argument that local government has failed consistently for years. I have seen many of the faults of the committee system and I have spent many unhappy hours with sub-committees of sub-committees and gone through all the processes and time that it takes to do something that appears to be relatively simple. However, let us consider what local government achieved 20 years ago. Innovations for equal opportunities took place in local government, not central Government, and the Greater London council introduced a policing committee. That idea was attacked then on the ground that local authorities in London should have nothing to do with the police, but it is now being implemented.

Local authorities did much innovative work on economic redevelopment and on the relationship between the regeneration of estates and economic development. That all happened in local government, and it involved much more innovation than many central Government Departments can claim to have introduced over the past 20 years. I wonder why we need to be so prescriptive in the proposals. Why must we insist on a separate executive and why is it not possible to consider alternative models? I do not argue that change should not be made or that we should not adapt to changing circumstances.

Many questions have been asked about the mechanisms involved in decision making and the role of the scrutiny committees. In many local authorities—it is not true in all; it depends on their political composition—the system is likely to be based on a one-party cabinet and a scrutiny committee that is subject to the rules on political balance. Therefore the scrutiny committee will be made up of a majority of members from the majority party on the council and the cabinet will be made up entirely of members of the majority party. How will the scrutiny functions operate and what will be the role of an opposition councillor on such a committee? I suspect that the scrutiny function might involve rather more political polarisation than often happens at the moment in the committee structures of local government.

Some hon. Members have discussed the possibility of there being two types of councillor. I have no illusions about all councillors having equal influence over events, because anybody who has been on a council knows that that is not true. I spent 17 years on a local authority, as a back bencher, as a committee chairman, in opposition and as leader of the council, so I have seen it from all aspects, and I have no illusions about the different influences of those positions and the power relationships between them. At the end of the day, however, in each position I, like any other member of the council, had one vote in any of the council's significant policy decisions.

If we are to have councillors whose primary role is as a member of a scrutiny committee, there is an important question about the resources for those committees, which was raised earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). Resources are not mentioned in the Bill. We know that the effectiveness of a Select Committee in the House depends on its members and, in particular, on their personalities. Those of us who have served on Select Committees recognise that they are seriously hampered by a lack of resources to do their work and the small number of people who work directly for them.

What will be the situation of local authority scrutiny committees when we move away from the experimental arrangements that have been set up in some places and completely separate the executive function from the scrutiny function? Who will service the scrutiny committees? Will a council officer be able to give advice to the executive and then go to the scrutiny committee and suggest how it might question the executive? That is not realistic.

Will working for the scrutiny committee be an attractive job for a local government officer? Will a junior officer go to the committee and say, "By the way, you really ought to question what the housing department has been doing and what it has suggested to the executive"? We need to examine how we can provide scrutiny committees with independent resources and people to work directly for them, rather than being dependent on others for their jobs and careers so that they will not want to upset someone when doing their work for the committee.

Dr. Lynne Jones: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and there are many dilemmas to face in how we go about making changes without increasing costs. We need closely to consider the scrutiny role and, in particular, the committees' powers to call witnesses and demand that they answer questions correctly. We need to be clear about those responsibilities.

Mr. Gerrard: My hon. Friend makes the critical point that the powers of the scrutiny committees need to be spelt out. Why will they not be able to initiate or propose policies in certain circumstances? The support that they receive will be critical to their effectiveness.

There has been much discussion about how members of scrutiny committees will function, but little discussion about the effect of the structural changes on local government officers and how they will work in relation to the executive and the scrutiny committees. We need to give that some thought because if we are to make these changes, we want to make them work. We want the scrutiny committees to have teeth and to be able to operate sensibly and efficiently; otherwise, they will become second-class structures and be seen as repositories for people who are not considered fit to be in the executive. If that happens, the system will start to fail.

The other issue that was raised earlier, on which I want briefly to comment, is secrecy and private meetings of the executive. That is a recipe for creating suspicion. We do not expect Cabinet meetings in Downing street to take place in public, but I should think that during several Governments' time in office, many decisions taken in private in the Cabinet have been regretted when the public reaction has become apparent.

We must tell councils to have executive meetings in public and to make agenda papers available in advance. It is not good enough to put that in guidance, because some people will totally ignore it. If we do not do that, we will contribute to poorer decision making. People should know in advance what will be discussed, and members of the executive will be alerted to matters that are likely to create a problem. It will also make it easier for the executive to change its mind. It is easier for us all to change our minds before we have announced our decision and put it into practice than to do so afterwards. I therefore hope that we will consider transparency and openness, and recognise that there is a significant difference between providing transparency after a decision has been made and providing it before it has been made.

We have discussed the problems that might arise and what would happen if there were an emergency. Most councils have provisions in their standing orders to make decisions in an emergency; that is not an insoluble problem. We all recognise that certain issues on the agenda, particularly to do with individuals, must be dealt with in private. Transparency is even more important when individuals, rather than groups, hold executive power.

Although I have concentrated on concerns about the Bill, the number and scale of amendments needed to make it work, to make the system open and to ensure that the scrutiny committees have the power and support that they need are not that great. I hope that we will consider those details, because I am sure that we can improve the Bill so that it will deliver what we all want—a better and more efficient system of local government.

7.18 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, and I commend the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard), whose 17 years of experience in local government shone through in his speech. I disagree with him about many matters, and I am sure that I shall continue to do so, but he made sensible points. I particularly liked his remarks about secrecy in the cabinet system being a recipe for suspicion because that is one of the points that I shall address.

My experience of local government is a great deal more limited than that of the hon. Gentleman. I was an opposition councillor in Hammersmith and Fulham, and so I am conscious of the need for change. Many decisions were made in closed caucus by the Labour leadership; nevertheless, I had the opportunity in committees to hold those leaders to account, which was valuable.

This is a large Bill, and in the limited time that I have I shall concentrate on two issues: cabinet secrecy and section 28, which has attracted so many headlines. The first problem about the secrecy of local government cabinets is that they will not be subject to the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, so statutory openness has been lost, with all that it brings with it. The second is that cabinets will inevitably tend to be single-party bodies, so the openness of cross-party discussion will be lost. Openness will be retrospective under new arrangements, so there will be scrutiny of decisions that have already been made, as has been said. In the present system, information must be made available three days before meetings.

Councillors who are not cabinet members—especially, and mostly, councillors who are members of opposition parties—will be excluded from the decision-making process. Allegedly, back-bench councillors will be able to spend

> more time representing their communities—

as the explanatory notes put it; however, the Conservative leader of Blaby district council pours scorn on the idea that they will have anything to do.

As the House knows, under the current committee system, all important council decisions have to be taken at meetings of the full council or its committees, and they are subject to the 1985 Act. Therefore, meetings are open to the public and the media, although, of course, exempt information can be discussed and decided in private session. Under the Bill, cabinets will not be required to meet in public, but must publish decisions after they have been taken. Furthermore, under clause 21,

> Regulations . . . may make provision for or in connection with preventing the whole or part of any record or document containing prescribed information from being made available to members of the public.

In other words, the Bill explicitly leaves open the possibility of blanket restrictions being imposed on access to information. Decisions of directly elected mayors or individual cabinet members will not be subject to the provisions of the 1985 Act, even though a record of decisions made must be published after they have been taken. My local district council, Blaby, is actively taking steps to avoid problems.

All that sits ill with comments made previously by the Prime Minister and other Labour Ministers. My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) mentioned that, in 1996, the Prime Minister said:

> The first right of a citizen in any mature democracy should be the right to information.

In March 1996, he said:

> We want to end the obsessive and unnecessary secrecy which surrounds government activity and make government information available to the public, unless there are good reasons not to do so.

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

That rings hollow after last week's debate on the Freedom of Information Bill and sits ill with the arrangements on local government cabinet secrecy.

I shall give a few examples of how secretive cabinet meetings are already creeping into the processes of local government. In Sedgefield district council, which, the House will not be surprised to learn, is Labour-controlled, independent councillor Tony Moore remarked:

without the press or public allowed in to listen to the debate of councillors, these secret meetings will leave us open to . . . abuse of power.

That is a reasonable comment, quoted in *The Northern Echo*. In Labour-controlled Lambeth borough council, the chairman of an organisation called Streatham Forward says that

To the present leadership of Lambeth council

openness "is an alien concept." That valuable newspaper, the *Highbury and Islington Express*, attacked the secret council meeting held in Liberal Democrat-controlled Islington borough council, lambasting

eight politicians wanting to decide our future in secret.

A report about Labour-controlled Newcastle upon Tyne metropolitan borough council in *The Independent* stated:

Ten councillors sit in single-party Cabinet meetings closed to the public. Afterwards the council issues a list of recommendations to a further committee, which although held in public, has been accused of "rubber-stamping" Cabinet decisions.

Those comments, many made by members of the Labour party, express a legitimate concern. We, too, should voice that concern, because local government should be transparent.

Blaby district council is Conservative-controlled. In a six-month experiment, it has already moved halfway to a cabinet system. However, the seven cabinet members make recommendations to the policy and resources committee—they do not make policy. The biggest concern is about the extra cost: the independent committee that recommends allowance rates has increased allowances by £100,000, which is a lot for a relatively small district council. It has also recommended that every councillor should have a laptop, which might be sensible, but it will certainly be expensive. In Leicestershire county council, the cost of allowances has now more than doubled.

The big problem in Blaby is that councillors who are not part of the cabinet are left out of decision making, even though attempts are being made to keep them informed through a members' information system. Under the Bill, the only committee work done will be that of scrutiny committees, which will only consider decisions after they have been made. Among all councillors of all parties in Blaby, there is no desire for the change set out in the Bill.

Mr. Waterson: Given his experience in Hammersmith and Fulham, is my hon. Friend aware that, under the new cabinet system there, more than 600 decisions have been made, only one of which has so far been reversed by the scrutiny process? Does he care to comment?

Mr. Robathan: I was not privy to those details, but I did know that there has been much criticism expressed in the area of the secrecy surrounding the new cabinet system. All members of good intent would regret that.

The section 28 debate is bizarre—it strikes me as strange that anyone should believe that public money should be spent promoting homosexuality as an alternative life style. I should like to correct what was stated earlier by the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, who has now left the Chamber. The right hon. Lady said that the issue has nothing to do with schools. Section 28 is an amendment made by the Local Government Act 1988 to the Local Government Act 1986, It states that "A local authority"—not a school or a teacher—

shall not . . . intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;

nor shall it

promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

Like the majority of people in this country, I find it strange that anyone should think that public money should be spent on such purposes.

Dr. Lynne Jones: First, will the hon. Gentleman explain how it is possible to promote homosexuality—is that not a contradiction in terms? Secondly . . . secondly—I have forgotten what my second point is. *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Robathan: Knowing the hon. Lady, I am sure that it was an important point. However, she made one sensible point, and I, too, would have thought that it is difficult to promote homosexuality. However, a report in *The Times* today, states that Berkshire health authority has issued a pamphlet called "Connect"—a gay newsletter aimed at children and young people of 11 years and older that teaches them how to cruise for sex. The hon. Lady might recall from the time when we were young that, sometimes, being told about such things makes them interesting and encourages one to go out and see what is what. I do not suggest that either she or I ever did so, but I believe that that is how homosexuality might be promoted.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Has my hon. Friend noticed the way in which the argument has changed over the past few months? A few months ago, we were told that section 28 had to be repealed because it stood in the way of teachers legitimately and properly dealing with homophobic bullying. Now, we are told that it does not apply in schools. The Government cannot have it both ways.

Mr. Robathan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Hearing the Prime Minister last Wednesday was astonishing. The debate is not about tolerance; it is about whether or not public money should be spent promoting homosexuality in schools and elsewhere.

Dr. Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Robathan: I am sorry, but no—I have given way twice and, as the hon. Lady knows, we are subject to a time limit.

Some say that section 28 has been quite ineffective, citing in evidence the absence of prosecutions under the provision. However, I suggest that its effect has been achieved through the message—the statement—encapsulated in it and the consequent deterrent effect that that has had. Local authorities have not felt minded to

push "Jenny lives with Eric and Martin", but, apparently, the publisher of that book promises to reprint it if section 28 is repealed. I have seen the book: it was pretty shocking in the 1980s, but, regrettably, it is less shocking now, because we are inured to such stuff. Nevertheless, I am quite certain that, if the provision is repealed, many publications that promote homosexuality will be produced.

The issue has become the star turn of the Bill, even though it is only one small part of it, so it is curious how out of touch with popular feeling the Government are. As a parent of two young children, I am against the repeal of section 28. A Gallup poll showed that a large majority of the British public are in favour of maintaining section 28. The Prime Minister should spend more time listening to his constituents in Sedgefield, where 71 per cent. of those polled stated that they want to keep the law as it is.

I am not a Roman Catholic, but I shall quote Cardinal Winning, because his words are reasonable and measured. He said:

> The current debate is not about homophobia, or discrimination, or intolerance. It is about education. It is perfectly natural that parents should be concerned that their children will be exposed to material that they do not consider either appropriate or advisable. Our politicians are imposing a values-free policy of political correctness on children, parents and society in general.

I well remember Cardinal Winning criticising the previous Conservative Government. Labour politicians should listen carefully to what he says, whether they are practising Catholics or not. He makes a good point.

The Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, stated:

> Section 28 is the logical outworking of putting the family at the heart of a stable society. It is, of course, discriminatory. Yet the setting of all values is a form of choice and discrimination in favour of certain moral principles.

Muslims, Sikhs and others have all criticised the Government's moves to repeal section 28. Dr. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, who speaks a lot of sense, put it well when he said that repealing section 28 threatens to undermine a moral code shared by the world's great religions. Perhaps he overstates the case, but it is an important marker, which Labour Members should consider carefully.

The Government have given the matter such priority because they have bought a wider gay agenda. They have bought the aggressive single-issue pressure group lobbying to which we have all been subjected. Indeed, I am sure that the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) is about to jump up and tell us about all the lobbying to which he has been subjected.

The Government apparently intend to publish a code of practice for employers to discourage discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, which will mean that gay partners get the same rights to health care, travel benefits and relocation allowances as married couples. There is also, apparently, a case for the law to be changed to allow gay partners to register as next of kin and thereby to qualify for inheritance tax relief.

To most people in the country, outside the Westminster village, that is nonsense. It is not intolerant of them to say that. I am not intolerant of all homosexuals. I do not think that homosexuality is an equivalent life style, but I am not intolerant of homosexuals. What people do in the privacy of their own bedrooms is largely up to them.

However, the proposal is an unwise move by the Government, which I shall certainly oppose. To most voters, especially Labour voters who are concerned about the real issues that face them in areas which may not be as prosperous as the area that I represent—this was well expressed by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle)—it is extraordinary that the Government should give such priority to this one politically correct issue. I believe that that is because it is being driven by the single-issue aggressive campaigning homosexual lobby. I wonder what Labour Members' voters will think, in the local elections and come the general election, as well.

7.33 pm

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): I look forward to the Government introducing their proposals to repeal section 28 in Committee, and I look forward to the removal of the amendments that were introduced in another place. I hope that that will happen soon.

No one should be in any doubt about the purpose of section 28. It was introduced not to protect, but to discriminate and to hurt. Its presence on the statute book directly or indirectly creates a climate of confusion, fear, intolerance and hatred. That climate still pervades the classroom, despite changes to the legislation in the 1990s—not directly, because of the Education Act 1994, but indirectly.

Let there be no doubt that the purpose of keeping section 28 is to maintain discrimination, to continue hurting, and to inflame prejudice. We heard some of that prejudice from the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan).

If there has been a consistent theme justifying the actions of those who oppose the repeal of section 28, it is the claim that there is no evidence to support its abolition. I shall focus on evidence.

The House knows that I was sacked from the Conservative Front Bench because I opposed the party's decision to force its Members through the Lobby to keep section 28. I shall say more about those events in a moment. In the weeks that followed, I received an enormous quantity of letters, more than 95 per cent. of which supported my stand.

As so much of the debate has focused on family values, let me begin by quoting from a family—a mother—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that the hon. Member for Blaby finds a letter from a mother funny. I think that it is rather important. She writes:

> My son is gay and has lived his life being bullied at school. His life has been an absolute misery.
>
> I, like most of the nation, cringed at the very thought of homosexuality (not knowing my son was gay.) I have recently found out and am so ashamed that I have been so ignorant of all the facts, believing that this was a life choice and not understanding that there is no choice in this matter—that it is purely a fact of nature.
>
> I now have to live with the fact that my ignorance has been a factor in how my son now feels about himself. He spends most of his time in a depressed and suicidal state.
>
> And yes, I do blame myself for this because he has been conditioned by myself to believe there is only one way to live and that is to marry someone of the opposite sex.

The letter continues:

> If children could go to their teachers and tell them why they are being bullied and it could be discussed in an open way, I'm sure that by the time they reach adulthood they would not feel ashamed and disgusted about themselves.
>
> This matter has touched me in a way I couldn't have imagined. I can't do much to help my son. I can't change the way people think. I can't educate people or make them understand what it can do to a young person—how society can make them want to commit suicide.
>
> But you and people like you can.

[Mr. Shaun Woodward]

[Interruption.] It is a great shame that four of the greater exponents of keeping section 28 on the statute book are not even interested in listening to that lady's letter—the mother who has had the responsibility of bringing up that child.

We have a choice today. The House will have to decide how we respond to that mother's letter. Do we listen or do we ignore her, her son and their family? If we ignore them, what does that say about our so-called family values? After all, families are not just about structures. They are about relationships and they are about love.

I regret the fact that so much of the debate has degenerated into an almost warlike atmosphere. It is presented as some kind of cultural war. Efforts to persuade people to adopt greater tolerance and understanding of those who are gay have been caricatured as a battle to defend family values. Somehow we have arrived at the ludicrous position in which arguing the case to end discrimination is seen as attacking the role of the family and family values in our society.

Nothing could be further from the truth. That caricature is misleading and grossly misrepresents the real argument. Somehow, being against discrimination is equated with being against the family. That is utter nonsense, utterly wrong and utterly misleading.

I find it difficult to understand why anyone should not logically want equal treatment for all our citizens. There is something very unpleasant about the way in which the argument about section 28 has evolved. Of course, discrimination has too long played a role in the history of our society. Likewise, we have long debated the meaning of equality.

Today, the rhetorical equation of civil rights with special rights—or as the hon. Member for Blaby called it, a special agenda—has dominated much of the debate. The tension between equality and individual freedom to discriminate fuels much of the discussion of section 28.

Regrettably, we live in a society that still fosters a system of sexual apartheid. Just as apartheid in pre-1994 South Africa denied black people full citizenship, so our laws deny that same full citizenship to those who are gay. As the mother's letter that I read earlier said so poignantly, it is all to easy to fail our children because of our bigotry, to think that it does not matter, or even to justify the discrimination because we think that it is about special rights, not civil rights.

In Britain we still have an age of consent that is not equal. We expect those of our citizens who are gay to fight in our wars, to defend our country and perhaps even to sacrifice their lives, yet only recently have we begun to realise that they, too, should have rights in the armed forces which may ask them to lay down their lives.

Much has been distorted in the argument about so-called pretend families. It is claimed that lesbians and gay men do not have families, only pretend families. We tell them that they are second best, if that.

However, we tend to consider the matter only from the perspective of adults. What about the children? As a trustee of Childline, which has counselled nearly 1 million children in 12 years, I have listened to children for a long time. I shall quote a letter from a mother, whom we shall call Kate. She said:

> My son David is 7-years old and already he is bullied at school for having gay parents. When he started school at 5 he thought there was no difference between having gay parents and straight parents. Not any more.
>
> We have been staggered at the levels of homophobia in schools.
>
> Hug a friend of the same gender and you are gay.
>
> Use a smaller girl's knife at lunchtime and you are gay.
>
> It's not all aimed at him.
>
> It is just a term of abuse. Like nigger used to be when society sanctioned racial prejudice, like Section 28 sanctions homophobia.
>
> The school knows about this kind of abuse, but feels unable to challenge it because of Section 28.

Kate says that David is all right because he has the support of loving parents and they have had the support of others, but what about the children in David's class who might be gay? The letter continues:

> How do you think these children are going to feel about their sexuality when it has been an officially sanctioned term of abuse throughout their childhood?

Section 28 contributes to a climate that sets some people apart from the rest of society. Yet Conservative Members present arguments that all too easily blame lesbian and gay people for setting themselves apart. However, the House is beginning to realise, as we realised with race apartheid, that sexual apartheid is wrong. It is just as cruel, and it arouses the same feeling of injustice, and the same pain and suffering. It is divisive.

Much of the debate has been about misunderstanding. The climate in which misunderstanding operates easily becomes one of fear, prejudice, intolerance and even hate. It would be wrong to suggest that all those who oppose the repeal of section 28 wilfully wish to mislead the public. However, some do. They distort the facts and present misleading arguments. Their conclusions are underpinned by appalling prejudice.

Let us consider a Conservative party press release, which was issued by the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment. It states:

> The Conservative party is quite clear. We believe that no public money should be spent promoting homosexuality. Public money should be used to raise educational standards.

Of course money should be spent on raising educational standards. However, resources need to be used to tackle bullying. Homophobic bullying is a serious problem in our schools. The Conservative party press release continues:

> Bullying is wrong. We do not believe that section 28 provides any legal impediment to teachers to tackle bullying.

The Tories claim that bullying must be stopped, but would not provide money to tackle that problem in schools.

The row over section 28 led to my sacking from the Conservative Front Bench. I had no idea that the Government intended to repeal section 28 until the Queen's Speech last November. As soon as I knew, I consulted every headteacher in every school in my constituency. Every secondary school headteacher wanted the law repealed. They gave example after example of homophobia. They said that, despite the fact that the law had changed, the climate meant that section 28 hung like a sword of Damocles over teachers' heads.

I tried to explain that to the Conservative Chief Whip. He was not very interested. I said that a party that wanted to listen to Britain should listen. However, he said that, when it came to section 28, the Conservative party was not listening. In three minutes, a meeting of members of

the shadow Cabinet decided, after taking no evidence from any interested party—social workers, teachers, the British Medical Association or children's charities—that section 28 constituted a good opportunity to promote their so-called family values. They ignored the sort of letters that they received from people whose families genuinely suffer.

The university of London produced some evidence. It polled teachers in 307 schools. The research concluded:

> Although the direct legal effect of Section 28 on school policies is minimal, the existence of the legislation sends a clear signal that there may be something dangerous or wrong about addressing the needs of gay pupils.
>
> This is an unnecessary, damaging and confusing message for teachers which adversely affects the lives of the young people with whom they work.

We must all regret that none of that is reflected in Conservative party propaganda, statements or briefings.

A briefing note that the Tories prepared on 27 March this year stated:

> Key point. Parents want the comfort of knowing that homosexuality cannot be promoted in schools at public expense, and that their children are protected.

How misleading—the Tories know that section 28 does not apply directly in schools. Their legislation provided for that. School governors have the responsibility for sex education. Yet the attempt to mislead the public continued, even by the Leader of the Opposition. In Prime Minister's questions, he challenged the Prime Minister to back down and asked him what people had to do to get him to back off politically correct nonsense.

The Prime Minister will not back off because the Labour party will do what is right, not what is expedient to exploit people's fears and prejudices. A teacher wrote a letter, which stated:

> I was asked to interview a young 15-year old boy who had not attended formal education for two years. It soon transpired that his failure to attend school had been due to vicious homophobic bullying.
>
> This resulted in a severe breakdown and admission to a psychiatric unit.
>
> He also told me that had been self-abusing and showed me his scars. Both his arms are covered by a huge series of scars from knife cutting.

Another teacher wrote about an appalling case. He said:

> When I was at school, there was a swing park next to Airdrie hospital, and next to this there was a set of public toilets.
>
> The one painful memory I have is that a young man was beaten to death in those toilets late one night.
>
> His face had been kicked and booted so badly that his face was no longer recognisable as a face.
>
> I do remember how everyone at school was laughing about it because the general idea was that he was gay and therefore his death was a good thing.
>
> The fact that he suffered an inhumane death . . . was irrelevant.
>
> I know of young kids who have been beaten up at school because they were perceived to be gay, and the school did nothing about it.
>
> A young man called Darren committed suicide last year because he could no longer go on suffering the beatings and the abuse.
>
> His teachers knew all about it, but because of Section 28 felt obliged to ignore it.
>
> Section 28 drove him to suicide.
>
> How many other young children has it driven to suicide, or suffered brutally . . . ?
>
> We will never know, but it cannot be denied that such a situation is immoral and unfair.

A few years ago, Neil Kinnock, the former leader of this party said:

> Section 28 is crude in its concept. Slanderous in its drafting. Vicious in its purpose.

It is vicious. It should go.

7.48 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): The Bill is bad and dishonest. Anyone who had any doubts should have been here this afternoon to listen to the Minister of State's introduction. It was appalling. She convinced no one, least of all members of her party. I do not wish to be unkind to her but she has had a bad week. I listened to her on the radio when she talked about what she described as "best value". After her big build up, the interviewer asked what was new about the idea. She had no answer. The interviewer described value for money in local government as simple common sense.

At the weekend, the right hon. Lady described the dome as a remarkable building. It is remarkable that it was ever built—I suppose that my party had a hand in that. However, it is a different matter to go on radio and claim that it constitutes a remarkable example of fine British architecture.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): It is.

Mr. Amess: I am sorry to disagree with the Under-Secretary, but I do not believe that the dome is a remarkable building, and the majority of British people are not proud of it.

The Bill is a bad measure. The Government tabled more than 300 amendments to it in another place. Most of them did not tackle the substantive points. This afternoon, the Minister showed that she had not mastered the arguments.

The Bill is dishonest. The 1997 Labour party general election manifesto states:

> Local decision-making should be less constrained by central government . . .

Well, yes. Also, it should be

more accountable to local people.

Yes. The manifesto goes on:

> We will place on councils a new duty to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area.

However, there was no rider to say that there would be no money for any of that, as the way in which Lord Dixon-Smith tried to amend the Bill shows. It also says:

> They should work in partnership with local people, local business and local voluntary organisations.

I want to share with the House the fact that none of that has happened in my town, Southend, where this dreadful experiment went ahead. Under no circumstances have the local people been consulted about the nonsense that has gone on. It adds:

> They will have the powers necessary to develop these partnerships. To ensure greater accountability, a proportion of councillors in each locality will be elected annually.

The Minister of State kept firing her guns at Her Majesty's loyal Opposition, who were saying nothing, and completely ignored Labour Back Benchers, although she knew only too well that they were deeply unhappy with

[Mr. Amess]

the Bill. Hardly any Labour Member has supported this shambles of a Bill this afternoon—everyone seems to oppose it—or perhaps they are terribly busy. The Government have had months to sort it out, yet we again find shabby legislation before the House.

I pay tribute to Friends of the Earth, Charter 88 and the Campaign for Freedom of Information. Under normal circumstances, they would be close to the Labour party but, judging by the brief that has been sent to me, they are very unhappy with the Bill. Although one or two hon. Members smiled earlier, it was Baroness Thatcher who in 1960 introduced a private Member's Bill to allow council meetings to be open to the press and the public. The Conservative party should be proud of that. When we were in office for our 18 years, we also passed legislation to allow the public access to key council papers three days before meetings.

Everything in the Bill is dishonest and rubbish is talked about it. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions seemed to disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) when he talked about modernisation. What the devil is this modernisation about? I shall tell the House. It is about the Labour party stifling any debate, just as it wants to stifle its own Back Benchers. The Bill is not about openness and transparency—that is an absolute travesty of what has happened in Southend.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) talked about her Liberal council. I shall talk about my Labour and Liberal council and we shall see how open and transparent it is. What the Bill suggests is nonsense. The public will not know what is being discussed at local authority cabinet meetings, apart from seeing a brief summary of decisions made after the meeting. Time after time, Labour Back Benchers tried to intervene on the Minister of State to make that point. Whether she could not be moved from her brief or did not understand the point I do not know, but I thought that she would have had a tangible argument to meet it.

The Bill will strip the British people and local newspapers of their right to observe how councils make decisions and how individual councillors vote. A year ago in Southend, for whatever reason, it was decided to opt for cabinet-style government. It has been a total disaster. What has gone on in Southend is a disgrace and I want to touch on many issues. I asked for a report on what the new system has meant in Southend and most councillors of all parties think that it is

> undemocratic that a small Cabinet of 8 make all the decisions and . . . the other 31 . . .

are turned scrutineer. That is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon referred to earlier. It is a waste of time being a scrutineer councillor. They have no power whatever.

What have the daft Government done in Southend? We all nodded and said that it is difficult to get people to stand for the council so we are to have another 13 scrutineers. We shall have more councillors, but fewer people will be involved in the democratic process. What a complete waste of their time. Although the Southend cabinet meets in public, the decisions are taken at its private briefing with officers. Like many hon. Members, I have been a councillor, though to be honest I did not much enjoy being a councillor in Redbridge. I prefer being a Member of Parliament. However, I got a feel for the way things work. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) or the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) said that parties met in private under the old committee system and the press did not get to hear what went on. That is not the case. Councillors could be whipped to any end in a private meeting on a three-line Whip, many things were leaked to the media and there was close scrutiny of decisions before they reached the committee stage.

I am also advised by the Southend councillors that morale is low among those on all sides who are not in the cabinet. They are very bitter about being excluded and people will become totally disenchanted in the long term, but that is what this rotten Labour party is all about: fewer and fewer people voting and fewer and fewer people getting involved in the democratic process, but Ministers have the nerve to come to the Dispatch Box to pretend that they are propagating openness and transparency. There is nothing open and transparent about this dreadful Government.

The cabinet system encourages decisions to be taken first and public debate to take place afterwards, which is odd.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Rubbish.

Mr. Amess: The hon. Lady should come to Southend to talk to Labour councillors. Let them try to convince her that it is no good taking decisions privately and arguing about them afterwards, when it is too late. The scrutiny committee has few powers and must refer matters back for reconsideration.

I have always been against officer-led local authorities, but the proposal plays into officers' hands as it is all about taking control away from democratically elected representatives. That is part of a hidden agenda for the long run to drive potential councillors out of local government and to shift their powers to regional assemblies, which we shall discuss later.

I also want to refer to the payment of councillors. In our local newspaper, the *Evening Echo*, I read:

> Southend's council leader could be set for a 100 per cent increase in allowances under new recommendations revealed today.

That has gone down like a lead balloon locally. Executive councillors could be paid £10,000 to £12,000, but I cannot see too many people giving up full-time jobs for such a salary. If the Bill becomes law, I shall be very worried about the way in which local government is going.

I want to share another matter with the House. Local people have been kept in the dark about important issues such as assisted area status because of this ridiculous cabinet system. What has gone on is a disgrace. At one point, Southend applied for objective 2 status under the fisheries strand arrangements. There was no consultation. Two wards in my area, Leigh and Chalkwell, were moved to the urban strand. There was no openness and no transparency. The one ward that I represent, Westborough, was taken out rather than being switched to the urban strand. Therefore no ward in my constituency qualifies, as a direct result of a lack of openness. On Friday, I shall raise on the Floor of the House a variety of disgraceful developments in connection with social services which I believe have been kept secret.

Then there is the nonsense involving our roads. Our poor businesses are struggling to make a living; now we find that, to try to get the traffic flowing, the barking mad council has arranged for us to have bus lanes all along the A13, and gridlock along the A127. Because of the secrecy of the cabinet system, local traders knew nothing of what was happening. Unfortunately, the Liberal-Labour-controlled Essex county council dropped a scheme that would have given us a decent road to the north of the town. At present, that is costing Southend dear.

Owing to the secrecy, the planning system is a disgrace. We never hear about houses in multiple occupation until it is too late. There have been many instances of masts being put on top of buildings; a number of my constituents are worried about the health hazards, but because of this secrecy, we hear nothing.

I am proud to represent a very Christian society in Southend, but what has gone on in regard to asylum seekers is an absolute disgrace. There are now more than 2,000 in the area that I represent. Given the strength of feeling, it is disgraceful that the matter has been handled in complete secrecy. Now that it is out of control, however, the council is taking legal action against the boroughs of Hackney, Redbridge and other areas.

This is a bad Bill. It is a dishonest Bill, and, unfortunately, it is a Bill that is absolutely typical of this dreadful Government.

8.2 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): The Bill is about reviving local government and local democracy after a Tory onslaught that continued for 18 years. It is difficult to take seriously any comments made by the Opposition, given that they were part of that onslaught, and given that we heard again this evening—in reply to a question from me to the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard)—that they still intended to abolish local education authorities. The Tory track record in local government is about destruction, and the Tory promise for the future is about further destruction and running down.

The Bill is about revitalising local government, but it is also about preparing local government for change—change that will be very important if local government and local democracy are to lead developments in the new century by ensuring that local authorities work as effectively as possible, and by leading local communities.

The Government have already recognised the importance of local authorities as providers of local services, either directly or indirectly. The replacement of compulsory competitive tendering by best value is a welcome indication of that. But the Government have also recognised the importance of leadership and innovation at local level. I welcome the new powers giving local authorities a duty to promote social, economic and environmental well-being.

Nevertheless, I ask my hon. Friends to recognise that local government also has a proud record of innovation and creativity. During the 1980s, it was local government that pioneered major changes for the benefit of the community, against a background of Tory Government hostility to local government, both generally and specifically.

In the early 1980s, when I was leader of Lancashire county council, I was involved with not just my local authority but county councils in areas such as the west midlands, West Yorkshire and Merseyside. Despairing of the Tory Government's inaction and their uncaring attitude to rising unemployment and the destruction of our local economies, the local authority sector worked with private enterprise to set up local enterprise boards, the precursors of regional development agencies.

The most spectacular achievement of Lancashire Enterprises was the saving of Leyland Trucks when it collapsed in the early 1990s. Lancashire Enterprises, the Labour authority-controlled local economic development company, worked with the private sector to preserve truck making in Lancashire, which continues to this day. We did that through judicious investment, rather than grant or subsidy. Moreover, we preserved thousands of jobs—the jobs of workers at Leyland Trucks, and of workers in the hundreds of feeder companies operating not just in Lancashire but throughout the north-west. That is an example of what could be done by the local government initiatives set up in the early 1980s. They showed that manufacturing could be saved by local authorities working with the private sector, although the Government of the time opposed what was happening.

I can give other examples of my experiences in Lancashire local government during those years, showing what local authority initiative can do. Lancashire country council, working with Greenpeace, pressed for a public inquiry into the proposed nuclear reprocessing at Sellafield, because we did not accept the statistics given to us by British Nuclear Fuels. We were not successful in that regard, but we were successful in securing new legislation: from that day on, European environmental law became United Kingdom environmental law. I believe that the sad events of recent months fully vindicate the stand that we took in calling for an inquiry into Sellafield all those years ago.

I could give many more instances of Lancashire's innovation against the background of a Government who did not care, did not listen and tried to impede. I am sure that many other Members can give examples from their own experience. I emphasise that all those initiatives, and many more, were taken under a Government who wanted to impede us. I welcome the powers in the Bill to encourage local authorities to take a leadership role, to work with the private and voluntary sectors, and to show the way forward for the community. However, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to consider whether those powers are sufficient to give the new leadership role the strength that it deserves.

Although the Bill gives wider powers to local authorities, there appear to be no proposals to look again at the legislation imposed by the Conservatives restricting local authorities' interests in companies. That is an extremely important issue. If local authorities are to play a full part in regeneration and if there is to be accountability for public money that is spent, it is essential for legislation relating to authorities' interests in companies to be revisited, and for authorities to be given stronger powers.

I ask for that in general terms, and also specifically. We should consider how local authorities can play their part in urban regeneration and, in particular, in the activities of the urban regeneration companies proposed in the Rogers report on urban renaissance. One such company already

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

operates in Liverpool. I want that project to be fully supported, but I also want the local authority to have sufficient powers in regard to that company, and other regeneration companies, to ensure public responsibility and accountability for the money that is spent.

I ask the Minister to consider whether local authorities will, through the Bill, be properly equipped to take on that leadership role and to tackle financial issues. If they are to take on real leadership, show the way forward and innovate, they will need access to funding that is flexible. Although I accept that there are cases where specific grants to local authorities are justified, it is wrong for the vast majority of central Government funding to local government to be prescribed.

In the past, local government has innovated against the odds. This Government want local government to innovate, but, to do that, it must have legal powers and the financial flexibility to be able to identify the funds to allow it to pioneer a new way forward.

During the debate, much has been said about the new structures. It is much easier to say what is wrong with existing structures than to find new ones that will solve all problems. I share many of the concerns that have been expressed. It is important that local authorities move forward with all members feeling that they are part of one authority. It is important that there is access to relevant information. It would be wrong if there were unnecessary divisions within councils, so I add my voice to those of hon. Members who have asked for another look at some of the detail of how the structures may go forward.

There is provision in the Bill for directly elected mayors where local people feel that they are appropriate. Given the new structures and the emphasis on new powers of community leadership in local government, there is a role for a directly elected mayor, provided that the people of the area want one. A directly elected mayor could bring new focus, direction and confidence to local authorities, but it is essential that the powers given to directly elected mayors are sufficient to make a difference and are exercised for the benefit of all the people of the area.

The Bill presents new challenges. It tries to revitalise local government, which was almost decimated by the Conservatives over all those years, but it also offers a new way forward. That new way brings opportunities, but also new challenges.

I ask the Minister to recognise the great achievements of local government in the past and in the present. I ask the Government to maintain their support for local democracy through directly elected local government, and I ask local authorities to grasp the opportunities that are offered.

8.13 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I am pleased to have the opportunity to take part in the debate. Like many other hon. Members, I cut my teeth in local government, both as an officer working for a local authority and, later, as a county councillor. Therefore, having worked on both sides of the local government fence, as it were, I appreciate, and pay tribute to, the hard work that officers and councillors in particular undertake voluntarily, working for local democracy, local governance and continuing devolution in Wales.

Wales is in a unique position with regard to the Bill because it has universal unitary authorities, the National Assembly and the Partnership Council: again, a unique way of working involving the structure at both parliamentary and local government level. I hope that, because of the interest in Wales in what is happening in local government and in the Bill, there will be good representation from Wales on discussions of the Bill in Committee.

In the White Papers in both England and Wales, the Government set out four main planks for modernisation; I hesitate to use that word after some criticism has been made of it, but let us accept it for the moment. The four main planks were: the introduction of the executive style of decision making; new standards of conduct for officers and members; the introduction of community planning; and the introduction of best value.

Best value has had a hesitant start in Wales. The beacon council schemes had to be put back a year because of the plethora of bureaucracy, papers and difficulties. Local government has sometimes been asked to respond and to change perhaps a little too quickly after the recent shake-up of local government structures in Wales, but the Bill sets out the rest of the changes. I was pleased in particular to hear the Minister's comments on community planning. She confirmed that the intention is to place a duty on local authorities to bring in community planning and made positive comments about that.

That duty is important. It is not in the Bill as amended. It is a pity that the Government did not use the other place to table their amendment, so that we could see what they meant by that. Nevertheless, the intention has been made clear and confirmed today. Therefore, I look forward to seeing the Government amendment to introduce the duty on community planning. *[Interruption.]* Excellent; the Minister has returned to her place. She is just in time. I bring to her attention what is perhaps an oversight in the Bill.

I take it that, if community planning is to be a duty in Wales, clause 4 will be amended. Therefore, it will have to be brought within the ambit of clause 92, which gives powers to the National Assembly to make regulations and so forth. Otherwise, community planning in Wales will be run by regulations from the Department in England. That cannot be right. We need to look carefully at the matter and to tidy up that provision.

On the whole, so far, what we have seen from the Government on local government is strong rhetoric about hearing local voices and enabling local decision makers, but weakness on practical methods of achieving that. The only way to involve local communities is to involve them at the earliest part of service delivery planning, so that they look at the options, are part of the vision of the future, and debate the different ways forward. That extends to businesses and voluntary and community groups.

Executive structures on their own are no guarantee of greater local accountability. Indeed, they could tend to isolate councillors one step further from local people, and we must avoid that. Therefore, one of the key modernising requirements—that word again, I am afraid—must be to move local government from its tendency towards oppositional decision making to a more collaborative and consensual process.

I appreciate that that is what the Government are trying to achieve in the Bill, but, without that key requirement, its other welcome measures could tend to strengthen, or

even to fossilise, current ways of doing things. The replacement of one set of, as it tends to be, slightly older men by one individual who is also likely to be a man, will not bring about the changes.

Reference was made to the report by the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on the number of women in local authorities. I regret that a local authority in Wales, Ynys Môn, or Isle of Anglesey county council, has the lowest number of women—just 8 per cent. of its members are women. My own local authority only just creeps above that: four of its 44 members are women, about 9 per cent. That has been unchanged for eight years; there has been no improvement in the amount of women represented in Ceredigion in the past eight years.

We must change that. The key way forward is to modernise our councillor profile. Community planning is an important step along that way. It can open up local government and encourage more balanced and informed participation.

How do we achieve that? One of the ways is to change the way in which we elect councillors. The encouragement towards annual elections is to be welcomed—I know that not everyone in Wales agrees with me on that. We have little experience of elections by thirds, although the old Rhondda district council did elect by thirds.

In the Representation of the People Act 2000, the Government introduced a rolling electoral register. That is welcome, but more important than all those changes—it is singularly lacking in the Bill—is the need to move towards proportional representation in local elections. That would be the single most important influence for change in local government. An amendment to the Bill to allow the National Assembly for Wales to experiment and to introduce PR would be a tremendously powerful tool for change.

I know that the Government have experimented with the way in which the May elections in England will happen. There are different days and ways of polling. The London elections will take place over several days. Those changes are all welcome. We look forward to the detailed reports on how they have worked. However, Plaid Cymru has long supported the single transferable vote, and we see no reason why it should not apply at local authority level.

My comments on the Government's proposals on the executive are perhaps not so warm. I welcome the Bill as amended in the other place. We should be seeking not to impose new structures on local government, but to establish best practice and to encourage local authorities to adopt it. Although I accept that the three new executive structures—potentially with a fourth or more—are flexible, that in itself does not greatly recommend them. We should be moving towards a system that allows local people to choose the local structure that suits them best.

In Wales, about 19 of the local authorities are either introducing a shadow system or experimenting with one. I think that Flintshire and Powys have said that they want to keep a "new look" committee structure. I do not know whether Blaenau Gwent has joined those authorities in that, but it may well have done. However, I feel very strongly that the National Assembly for Wales should decide what systems of local authority should operate in Wales, and that the decision should be an example of devolution and subsidiarity—to use a now rather old-fashioned word—at work. As the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) who has left the Chamber said earlier, it is an excellent opportunity for the Government to put into action their new-found appreciation—announced in *The Observer*, on Sunday—of the lessons of devolution.

Elected mayors are a case in point on those lessons. The idea of elected mayors is quite popular in some of the larger cities in England—

Ms Armstrong: And with the public.

Mr. Thomas: Yes, I appreciate that. However, I do not think that the same is true in Wales. We could have elected mayors in Wales, and it might make sense to have one in places such as Cardiff or Swansea. Wales may also soon have a third city—although I should not make a pitch on behalf of Wrexham or even Aberystwyth. However, I do not detect a real groundswell of support for elected mayors in Wales. Indeed, I think that mayors are now very much off the agenda in Wales, thanks in no small degree to the antics of Cardiff's Lord Mayor. The antics were precisely what people feared might happen with elected mayors—individuals taking power for themselves, riding roughshod over others' opinions, feathering their own nests and generally ignoring events in the local community.

Mr. Waterson: Does the hon. Gentleman, in summary, perhaps agree with the Deputy Prime Minister, who said that he was "not a fan" of directly elected mayors?

Mr. Thomas: I agree that I am not a fan of directly elected mayors, but I am prepared to allow local people to have a say in whether they want to have directly elected mayors.

Last May, in its press release on the new Lord Mayor, Cardiff city council said:

> Under the new set-up, the process for installing the Lord Mayor took less than three minutes instead of the usual two hours, there was no civic lunch and the Lord Mayor drove himself home instead of having a chauffeur-driven car, saving Council Taxpayers thousands of pounds.

I do not know what mileage allowance Cardiff councillors receive, but that journey home has cost Cardiff's council tax payers a great deal.

My concern about the new executive structures is that they do not seem to offer a real way of dealing with a failing system. If a mayor or a "new look" cabinet is failing, how can local people deal with that failure, get rid of the mayor or cabinet and install a different system?

Plaid Cymru supports the principle of separation of the executive. Implementation of such a principle would only make explicit what already happens in most authorities.

Ms Armstrong: It is in the Bill.

Mr. Thomas: We feel that it should be done by encouragement of best practice and not by compulsion, and that the National Assembly should be the body to decide on the matter. I should like to see what the National Assembly and local government in Wales could come up with by using a voluntary framework and after real consultation with their communities, the voluntary community sector and businesses in Wales.

[Mr. Thomas]

I acknowledge that de facto executive structures already exist. I have a very small footnote in the history of local government in Wales, as I was the first appointed political assistant—under whatever Act it was—in Wales. I have spent three years in party caucuses and party groups, behind the closed doors. I know how they work and have written up their minutes. Undoubtedly, the Bill's one real failure is that it does not deal with the need for access to information. I have been there behind the closed doors, and I know what it is like. Unfortunately, on that matter, as Labour Members have said, the Bill is a retrograde step.

It is not good enough for the onus to rest on local authorities to open up their cabinets to scrutiny. It may well be that the National Assembly will establish more stringent regulations in Wales than apply in England—although many English Members may not appreciate that. Nevertheless, the principle that should apply is that the public should have access to information—precisely as they do under the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985—unless that information relates to personnel matters or commercial decisions.

I think that the Minister put up a bit of smokescreen about matters such as emergency decisions, but those should be removed from legislation. In the absence of political balance in cabinets—I do not think that, practically, we can assist in achieving that balance in cabinets—we have to have public scrutiny and accountability. The best form of public scrutiny and accountability is not a scrutiny committee, but access to the information on which decisions are made.

I pay tribute to those councillors in Wales who are now opening their cabinet structures to the public. There might be a slight Plaid Cymru balance in this, but I should like to name some of the councils involved. One can watch the meetings of Gwynedd county council's cabinet, for example, live on the internet. One can see it all happening on the internet. *[Interruption.]* It is live on the internet. Hon. Members should tune in and have a look at it, but they should choose the English-language feed, because the Welsh one might be slightly misleading.

Ms Armstrong: Does that mean that, in those areas, Plaid Cymru has stopped having group meetings first to take the decisions?

Mr. Thomas: Of course it does not. However, the decisions are taken openly, in cabinet. I do not think that the Labour party has stopped having group meetings. The day that political parties stop having group meetings will probably be the day that the cabinet structure is also no longer used.

Recently, Caerphilly opened its cabinet meetings to the public. My own authority, Ceredigion, under pressure from the opposition Plaid Cymru members, has just opened up to the public its cabinet meetings.

It is essential that the Bill is amended to give the public access to the documents on which decisions are taken, so that they can determine for themselves why the decisions were taken. We should not be going backwards. The 1985 Act has worked very well. It is valued by businesses, community groups and individuals. They are able to see the agenda and papers beforehand, information can be provided, and the people can lobby. Often, at the end of that process, better decisions are reached.

An important aspect of public access to information is that it allows us to make better decisions. Openness breeds a culture of consultation and accountability, but secrecy breeds arrogance and contempt for the electorate. We have recently seen some examples of that.

Local government in Wales has an honourable tradition. It has introduced uniform secondary education, helped to establish the health service and widened provision of leisure facilities and libraries. Now, it is leading on sustainable development in Wales. Much in the Bill will continue that tradition. However, there are some serious sticking points in the Bill—on executive structures, access to information, community planning and proportional representation—which I hope will be fully dealt with in Committee.

Plaid Cymru will certainly support the Bill on Second Reading, so that it can be considered in Committee and, I hope, knocked into even better shape.

8.28 pm

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions said that the Government were committed to devolving powers, and that there was a need for people to have more control over their lives and more influence over decision makers. We all accept that. However, the Bill will not achieve that.

The Minister may respond to my scepticism about the Government's commitment to devolving powers by repeating her earlier remarks that that commitment is shown by the fact that we now have a Welsh Assembly and a Scottish Parliament. However, some argued at the time of the referendum—and continue to argue—that a Welsh Assembly and a Scottish Parliament had little to do with devolution, but much to do with going down the road of nationalism and separatism. Almost 12 months on, I see no reason to depart from that view.

In Wales, there is almost total disillusionment with that so-called act of devolved power. The people of Wales cannot see that they have any more influence over the decision makers because they now have an institution based in Cardiff. We were told that, with the Assembly, we would put powers back into local authorities. One of the ways in which that was to be done—we were told that this was the main reason for a Welsh Assembly—was by making a bonfire of the quangos. Almost 12 months on, that bonfire has not happened—indeed, it has been a damp squib. Most people knew at the time that that was a cheap publicity stunt to try to persuade people to vote for a Welsh Assembly. The quangos have not been scrapped, and are very much intact. Local authority powers have not been increased.

One of the ways of maintaining the powers of local authorities would be to support the amendments in another place, which would give authorities the opportunity of having a mayor, a leader and a cabinet but would also give them the opportunity to continue with the committee system if they believed that that system was more relevant to their community and more able to respond to its problems.

The Bill is not about devolving power. I cannot see the logic of a Government who are seemingly committed to devolution, but are also centralising power in the hands

of mayors, leaders and cabinets. That is not acceptable to me, or to my local authority. The role of councillors who are not in one of those bodies will be almost non-existent.

The Government may say that they are setting up scrutiny committees and that councillors will have a positive role, not just in scrutinising decisions that have been taken, but in developing ideas which then become the policy of the local authority. However, from talking to local authority members, it is my view that those committees could be worthless, and that the role of local authorities then would be minimal.

Local authorities should have the opportunity to continue with the committee system if that is what they want. If they think that a mayor or a leader with an elected cabinet would reflect the aspirations, or respond to the problems, of their communities more than a committee system, so be it. I have no argument with that. However, we should not take away the option of a committee system.

If we are going to have a mayor, or a leader with a cabinet, the system should be far more open and democratic than is proposed by the Bill. The Government could legislate so that all cabinet meetings remained open to the public and to all councillors. The present system—of leaving that decision to the executive—is unsatisfactory.

The agenda and the background papers should have to be made public in advance of the meetings. Every step in the decision-making process should be documented and made public. The decision of the proper officer of an executive to make an item exempt could be appealable. The officer's advice to the executive should be made public prior to the meeting.

We should extend the period of availability of papers relied on by councillors before taking decisions. Public reports and background papers should be made available five working days in advance by the council and by the executive. All public reports produced by the council or executive should list background papers, and councils should publish all public reports and background papers on a web site—if there is one—seven working days in advance of any meeting, and the executive should have to do the same.

The Minister may respond by saying that, in the guidance notes for the Bill, all these things are possible. However, I do not want them just to be possible; I want them to be compulsory. We will always have rogue authorities who pick the worst system to defend their unacceptable ways of operating. We must consider making compulsory those things that are optional under the Bill.

Decisions should not be left to individual councils. Mayors and individual politicians will wield considerable powers in their own right, as their decisions will not have to be ratified by the executive or the council. That adds to concern about the arrangements. Vital decisions about housing, education, social services, the closure of facilities or the contracting out of services may be taken in far greater secrecy.

The Campaign for Freedom of Information has made a number of points on the Bill. It says:

> Mayors are likely to be responsible for many decisions, which they will effectively take on their own. Individual "cabinet members" may also be given similar powers, and officials will be responsible for taking a wider range of decisions. As these decisions will not be taken at "meetings" the 1985 Act cannot directly apply. However, the Bill should be amended so that the public is given equivalent rights to see papers before decisions. That is reports, recommendations and background papers should be open to the public unless they contain exempt information.
>
> The Bill should also be amended to require a short period of delay (a week has been suggested) before executive decisions can be implemented, with powers for non-executive councillors or a scrutiny committee.
>
> The Bill includes measures to improve ethical standards. But if decisions are taken in private, by the executives and individual politicians, there will be less scrutiny of whether councillors' private and financial interests are properly declared, and less oversight of the award of contracts and of appointments to outside bodies.
>
> Removing the requirement to publish agendas and papers in advance of decisions could encourage legal advice to politicians, and it will be harder for the monitoring officer to fulfil his/her responsibilities to ensure decision making is legal and ethical.

The amendments made in the Lords to approve the present committee structure should be accepted. They would maximise opportunities for councillors and electors in every local authority area to have a say on decisions that may affect their community.

The previous Government passed approximately 200 Acts that altered the role and powers of local authorities, almost always taking powers away. If the Government are committed to devolving power to local authorities, they should start by reversing many of the measures in those 200 Acts. They should also quickly scrap the private finance initiative, which gives private companies the right to build, own and, in many instances, run services.

Many things can be done to give local authorities a greater role in the running of our communities. Giving them a bigger role in job creation, as happens in countries such as Germany, would help people to relate to local authorities, because they would see that they had some relevance to their communities. It is naive to believe that setting up a cabinet system or introducing mayors will result in people suddenly coming out in droves to vote in local authority elections. People will vote in elections if they see that they are relevant to their community. We should focus on policies that are decided by local authorities rather than constitutional or structural issues.

8.40 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Having served as a councillor in the London borough of Hounslow for about a year before I translated to this place, I have some modest qualification, but none as extensive as those of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith). I shall study his detailed recommendations.

I shall concentrate on clause 91, the proposed repeal of section 28 and the whole business of homosexuality and teaching in schools, principally because it is a matter of grave concern to people throughout the country. The Government are obsessed with homosexuality and race. The Bill is not the only measure in which we are faced with the issue. The Government's caving in to the European Court of Human Rights and admitting homosexuals to the armed forces also affects my constituency. Even as we are debating the Bill, the other place is debating the age of consent. The Government wish to impose on the other place a requirement to reduce the age of consent to 16, notwithstanding the clear warning issued by the Waterhouse report on the abuse of young people in north Wales.

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

This Bill and the Learning and Skills Bill show that the Government are in a shambles on sex education in schools. They face not just both ways, but all ways. The Home Office has published a document called "Supporting Families". The Home Secretary is keen to encourage us all to believe that marriage presents the best framework within which to bring up young people. I think that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment also holds that view. As the Bill before the Lords today shows, the Government want not just to appeal to middle England through "Supporting Families", but, through other measures, to square the circle with the minority groups that the Labour party is always in the business of seeking to appease.

The hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) sought repeatedly to dismiss as prejudiced those of us who disagree with him.

Ms Armstrong: Hear, hear.

Mr. Howarth: It is fine for the right hon. Lady to say "Hear, hear"; dismissing one's opponents as prejudiced is very simple, but it does no credit to her or her party. There is a legitimate view on the other side of the argument. I wonder whether she says "Hear, hear" to my support for the Bishop of Lichfield, whom I was pleased to call a friend when I was the Member of Parliament for Cannock and Burntwood. He referred to the stabilising benchmark of section 28, but I suppose that in the right hon. Lady's terminology, he is prejudiced too.

Parents are writing to all of us in droves about the issue.

Mr. Swayne: The Minister thinks that they are all prejudiced.

Mr. Howarth: Of course, in the Minister's view they are all prejudiced. She will know that many correspondents explain that they are not homophobic, but they do not believe that normal heterosexual marriage can be put on the same moral basis as two men or two women living together. That is what nearly all of them said, and many of them are teachers—I believe that the Minister herself used to be a teacher.

Some of my hon. Friends from England may not be aware that in Scotland the issue is dominating the debate. The *Daily Record*, which is not known as a Conservative newspaper, reported on 19 January "2:1 against gay lessons". Some 66 per cent. of those surveyed wanted to keep section 28, which shows what the people of Scotland want. An anonymous Labour Member was quoted in the *Daily Record* yesterday as saying:

> The problem is that someone decided that they were going to make the abolition of section 28 a crusade.
>
> We have lost the support of a large section of the electorate and we have lost the support of Scotland's leading Catholic cleric.

That, of course, is Cardinal Winning, who has done a magnificent job of articulating our concerns in Scotland.

The country is up in arms and the Government have no solution. They will remove clause 117 from the Learning and Skills Bill, which was amended by Baroness Young in the other place. They will try to reinsert into this Bill the repeal of section 28 which they were prevented from doing in the other place. We are in limbo. Meanwhile, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has published some guidelines that have been roundly criticised by those who do not believe that they represent a proper instruction to our young people.

The Government say that section 28 does not prevent homosexuality from being taught and promoted in schools. In that case, why do they wish to repeal it? Why is it necessary for the Government to engage in that confrontation with two thirds of the nation? There is an inconsistency, because originally the Government told us that they wished to repeal it to prevent bullying. Now they tell us that it is because it does not prevent homosexuality from being promoted in schools anyway.

We are all against bullying in schools, of any description or on any grounds. To suggest that anyone is interested in protecting section 28 to allow bullying is unworthy of Ministers and the Government. They know that the chief inspector of schools, Chris Woodhead, has made it clear that it is nonsense to suggest that section 28 stops schools tackling the issue of bullying. Indeed, Mr. David Hart said at one stage:

> The Government needs to be very clear why it is going down this road. Section 28 has not caused difficulties but has constituted a protection which by and large has been welcomed.

It is possible that he has changed his mind since then.

The hon. Member for Witney said that schools in his constituency have expressed concern that section 28 stands between them and stamping out bullying, but that has not been my experience in my constituency. I suggest that many of my hon. Friends would agree.

Parents do not wish to see the flood of pornographic material, for that is what some of it is, which was coming into our schools previously. Parents' view of how the matter should be treated is summed up in a publication that is produced by the Christian Institute and makes the case for extending section 28. It states:

> Civilised societies have always restrained sexual activity. Until comparatively recently, social control strongly promoted marriage. Homosexual proselytism seeks to reverse this and to manipulate young people into seeing homosexuality as an acceptable and morally right lifestyle.

That is what people in this country overwhelmingly object to. They are not intolerant of what people do in their own homes, but they believe that certain standards in our society should be maintained.

Section 28 was enacted in 1988, when I was a Member of Parliament. As Nick Seaton of the Campaign for Real Education has said:

> Before Section 28 came into force we were getting considerable numbers of parents complaining to us about the promotion of homosexuality in schools. After Section 28 it almost disappeared as an issue. If Section 28 were to be repealed it's almost certain that the promotion of homosexuality would become a huge bone of contention between parents and schools.

We do not need to be assured by Ministers that that will not happen because their assurances will be worthless. That is because already material is coming into the public domain. The draft guidance of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is out for consultation. Paragraph 6.1 states:

> Elements of sex and relationship education are also provided by a range of people in the wider community including health professionals, social workers, youth workers, peer educators and visitors.

There we see it. There is no section 28 control in respect of health promotion, and a flood of material is coming in under that guise.

I draw the attention of the Under-Secretary, with whom I had the pleasure of serving on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, to a document that has been published by Camden and Islington community health services NHS trust, which is entitled "Colours of the Rainbow". It contains some pretty disgraceful stuff, and I urge the hon. Lady to read it. It is not something that might be available in the event of section 28 being repealed. It is available now because there is no control over the material that health authorities can put out.

We have a key stage 1 lesson, the purpose of which is to

consider one explanation of a family.

It is intended for five to seven-year-olds. It ends by saying:

Finish by making the point that different people live together as a family and what is important is that they love and care for each other.

Those are laudable objectives. However, the document is seeking to promote homosexuality as a pretended family relationship. Many of us object to that.

There is another example of an attempt to equate homosexuality with normality. We are told that research has found that

about 50 per cent. of women and men have experienced a sexual attraction to someone of the same sex.

There is the extraordinary claim that

nearly 40 per cent. of all men had sex with another man at some point in their lives.

This material is trying to assert that somehow homosexuality is perfectly normal and that children should regard it as being on a par with normality and a normal heterosexual relationship.

The publication refers to resources and to the "Playbook for kids about sex" by Joanie Blank and Marcia Quackenbush, published by Sheba Feminist Publishers in 1982. For the assistance of the House, I have a copy of the playbook. I shall not explain some of what it covers, but one passage reads:

When grown-ups choose someone to be one of their sexual partners, they sometimes choose a person of the same sex and they sometimes choose a person of the other sex. Some big words are sometimes used to name people by the sex partners they choose.

We then have mention of heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual, as if they are all equally compatible. Many of us would argue that that is not the case.

The biscuit is taken by the health promotion service in Avon in a publication entitled "A Practical Guide to Challenging Homophobia in Schools". Here we have "Roles for the 'Race' Game". That wholly contradicts the Prime Minister's understanding when he went to the Ayr by-election and found ghastly posters stating that there was no question of role play taking place in the schools in that area. In fact, it is happening today, and I have the evidence. Children as young as 12 are being encouraged to be

a female sex industry worker—

whatever that is—

a Chinese bisexual 15 year old Young Man,

a transvestite cabaret artist, a Black Disabled Lesbian who is a wheelchair user and a nun.

It beggars belief to think that public money is being used to promote that.

Hon. Members may laugh, but the most disgusting literature of all is the "Gay Sex Now" booklet produced in Glasgow. I gather that £50,000 of public money was used to produce a booklet that children as young as 12 are seeing. I invite the Minister to have a look at it.

Members of the House of Lords, led by Baroness Young and the Bishop of Winchester, and Mr. Brian Souter and some other public-spirited people are the only ones who want to protect our children by standing in the way of the Government's ambition, for which the Bill is the chosen vehicle.

8.55 pm

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan): We have just had 15 minutes of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) speaking about a Bill that introduces new proposals for local government. He did not mention local government once.

I welcome the Bill, which represents the second phase of necessary change to local government. I have no ideological bias, but I have more than 20 years' experience as a councillor.

I especially welcome the new structures in part II. The structures that existed for most of my time in local government seemed to work reasonably well. We had to do some tinkering around the edges occasionally and create a few new sub-committees to deal with the bits and pieces. However, our chief executive once told me that our council had 75 officer working groups. On investigation, they all seemed necessary, reasonable and forward looking, but it was clear that there was no democratic overview of those groups. Members had no control over them and could make no input to them.

When the working groups' reports went to committee, they received no proper scrutiny because departmental input was partial in any given area, and no one was willing to take control to push items through. The working groups considered matters such as drug action teams and services for the elderly and for young people, which cut across several departments and committees. The absence of proper scrutiny, democratic control and direction was a result of the old committee structure in that council. There was a clear need to examine alternatives.

Another major factor confirming my view that we needed to look at our organisation was my experience with best value. Twelve months ago, before I was somewhat unexpectedly catapulted into the House, I chaired the best value review panel in Wigan council. The panel was busy setting up ways to introduce best value in that local authority, and was studying the challenge process that involves the four Cs—compete, compare, consult and challenge. The panel was designed to look at those elements of the council that we wanted to review.

It quickly became clear that the intensiveness of the process was being hindered because councillors did not have time to engage in that process and conduct their normal committee work. We had to find ways to free up time and give people more chance to do all the work demanded of them.

It has been said that many of the Bill's proposals are too rigid. That is not my experience. Earlier this year, I attended the Labour party local government conference. I ran a workshop on the new structures, and it was attended by councillors from metropolitan, district,

[Mr. Neil Turner]

unitary and county councils. Those councils were under all sorts of control—some were overwhelmingly controlled by the Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat parties, others were under no specific party control, and still others had only one or two Labour councillors.

That diversity of experience was very useful. When we started talking about how to implement the new structures proposed in the Bill—and the cabinet structure in particular—it was amazing to discover the immense diversity of approaches that people were adopting. I say amazing, but it should not be all that surprising. Under the present system, no council has the same committee structure as its neighbour. The structures have evolved because of the history of those councils, the personalities involved and, more important, the way in which they want to serve the needs of their communities. Just as the committee structures have evolved, so, too, will the new cabinet structures.

There must be scrutiny not only of what the cabinet has done but of what it will be doing. In my authority, policy development groups are part of the scrutiny process. Other councils take a different line. However, nothing in the Bill will prevent pre-scrutiny from taking place. If there is to be proper scrutiny, it is essential that it takes place before, as well as after, policy is decided.

I welcome part I, and particularly clause 2, which deals with the need to promote the environmental and social well-being of communities. Clause 5 is vital in that respect: if the community leadership role of councils and councillors is to be exercised properly, unnecessary restraints must be freed up. Clause 5 will allow that to happen.

We must ensure that partnerships are developed to the full. To be real partnerships, developed with the private sector and voluntary groups, both sides must bring something to the table. There is no room for aspirations alone—there must be the cash to back up those aspirations.

When she replies to the debate, will the Minister tell us whether clause 3(2) excludes the possibility of councils making reasonable charges for the services that they provide? Will it prevent them from applying for additional funds through supplementary credit approvals?

I am aware that other people want to speak, so I will finish on this point, Mr. Deputy Mayor.

Mr. McDonnell: My hon. Friend thinks that he is back in local government.

Mr. Turner: I beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have not quite got used to my new role. I apologise.

Part III deals with standards. Local government is remarkably sleaze-free—we have a lot of hard taskmasters and scrutineers in the form of the general public. I think that most councillors welcome such public scrutiny. The independent scrutiny committee will provide additional reassurance that allegations will receive independent consideration.

When considering local government, we must recognise that people both inside and outside councils make vexatious and politically motivated allegations against councillors. When the scrutiny committee considers such allegations, they should lance those boils quickly and cleanly. I hope that if the committee believes that vexatious and politically motivated allegations have been made, its members will be able to name the people responsible to ensure that in future those people will think twice and ensure that any allegations have a real foundation.

9.4 pm

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): The speeches of Conservative Members deteriorated rapidly after the excellent and constructive contribution by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) accused the Government and Labour Members of being obsessed with sex and race. I had no intention of speaking about section 28 because we are dealing with a complex Bill about local government, but it is interesting that both he and the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) chose to spend the whole of their speeches discussing the one aspect of the Bill that relates to sex. It is they who are obsessed, not Labour Members.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: All that I was seeking to point out was that I am receiving a huge number of letters on the subject, as I suspect that the hon. Lady and other hon. Members are. The Bill is one of two measures that deal with the issue, which is of live concern to people now.

Dr. Jones: I respond to those constituents who write to me, and they are not writing in droves, even though I have a high profile in the local press on the issue. I receive many letters from people who take the opposite view, including two correspondents who are senior members of the Church. They support the repeal of section 28.

Both the hon. Member for Aldershot and the hon. Member for Blaby make it clear that they regard any relationship involving homosexual people as "pretend" and not at all valid. At least the hon. Member for Blaby had the honesty to admit that he advocated discrimination against such people. Discrimination is, of course, why the legislation as it is constituted is probably not in accordance with the European convention on human rights. The sooner we change it so that it does comply, the better.

The material that was quoted by the hon. Members for Aldershot and for Blaby was an insult to the good sense of school governors, who, in consultation with parents, have the last say in decisions on policy involving sex and relationships education. There is plenty of inappropriate heterosexual material that people could quote, but I note that Conservative Members do not suggest that there should be a clause that prevents the promotion of heterosexuality. That would be just as ridiculous as section 28, which I hope will be abolished. It is inappropriate and unnecessary in the real-life situation in schools today.

I want to spend most of my time talking about the local government provisions in the Bill and reforms to local democracy. No one would disagree with the Government's intention to bring new life to local democracy. We all realise that that is sorely needed. I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), and I am pleased that things are not quite so dire in Birmingham as in Liverpool. It shows that there is a great variety of activity around the country.

Voting in local elections has fallen off, and there is less interest, although in last year's local government elections there was a 55 per cent. turnout in one of my wards, due to strong campaigning. If we are to revitalise local democracy, we must address two fundamental issues. First, local government must be more accountable to the electorate. Secondly, we need a surplus of competent people who want to take an active role and serve as local councillors. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon admitted that in his area there is great difficulty in persuading people to come forward to take on that role. That is certainly the case in Birmingham. There is often little competition for candidates. Whatever structures are in place, if people do not want to come forward and take on the role of councillor, local government will not be healthy.

I shall talk about greater accountability first. Over the years, there has been so much centralisation of decision making that it is well known that many of the decisions taken by local government are dependent on approval or finance from central Government. That is the main reason why people are less interested in taking part in local elections—either as voters or as candidates.

It is difficult to decide who is really responsible for councils' decisions. For example, in Birmingham, there is much controversy over proposals to close old people's homes. The local authority was forced to take that route because the homes need refurbishment and modernisation to bring them up to standard, and the money is not available. Who is really taking that decision? Is it local government or central Government who hold the purse strings? When councillors are unable to take the decisions that they know their electorate want, they blame central Government. Unless we put that right, all the tinkering with the structure of the system will come to nothing.

In the housing Green Paper, the Government propose new powers for local authorities to raise capital on their housing assets. In his statement to the House, the Deputy Prime Minister admitted that there was discrimination against council housing. However—as with many measures that seem to be moving in the right direction—there are so many strings attached that those additional powers will be given only to councils prepared to jump through the hoops imposed on them from the centre.

That is not what local electorates want. It is not what council tenants want. By all means let us give them a vote on changing their landlord, but there should be a level playing field for the options. Tenants should not have to opt for another landlord because that is the only way to raise the finance for the modernisation and improvement of their homes. I hope that the Government will deal with that point.

I agree with several of the points made by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster). It is wrong that such a high proportion of local government finance is centrally controlled—that is true of the Government grant and of the business rate. Until the introduction of the poll tax, things were moving in the other direction: about 60 per cent. of local government finance was raised locally.

However, the figure went into reverse as a result of the introduction of the council tax. The Tory Government wanted to keep council tax low to try to make it acceptable after the poll tax fiasco, so they increased VAT to subsidise it. We should start to move back again—to make local government accountable because it raises most of its finance locally. We need to do that over a long period, because we cannot make sudden changes.

If the Government are serious about local democracy, they should think long and hard about that matter. Perhaps it could be addressed in the local government finance review Green Paper. In the short term, perhaps the council tax could be made more progressive; in that way, councils would be allowed to raise more money.

As I pointed out, it is not only structures that are important in encouraging more people to participate. However, they do have a role. I share some of the concerns expressed by other hon. Members that the distinction between executive and back-bench council members could mean that there was a small number of high-profile, perhaps well-paid members, while the others were seen as second-class, with no real opportunity to influence decision making.

Most people who want to enter politics—whether nationally or locally—do so because they want to bring about changes and improvements; they do not want to be glorified social workers. Taking into account the concerns of their electorate is a role for elected members, but they need to be able to translate those concerns into action at a political level so that policy changes are made to address them. That motivates people to get involved in politics, and I have grave doubts about whether the proposed model will enable the majority of elected members to take part in policy development.

Many Members have suggested ways in which the system might be improved, but time is short and I do not have the time to go into them. However, it is important that we do not have central control. To return to the point about local accountability, surely the Government should impose on local government the responsibility to review its procedures and to consult the electorate—there may also be the opportunity to hold referendums—but final decisions should be taken locally, not imposed centrally.

I do not accept the idea that the committee structure does not provide opportunities for scrutiny. As the chair of a major committee and as a back bencher, I took my scrutiny role seriously. I also had access to the most senior council officers. Under the separation that is proposed, will back-bench members have the same access to the chief executive and to the directors of housing and social services?

It is interesting that we recently held a meeting between Birmingham Members of Parliament and the new director of social services for the city. I asked her to whom she felt accountable as director. She immediately said, "The leader of the council," then reluctantly added, "And the deputy leader." The executive member for social services did not get a look in.

We all know from our experience of local government that a tremendous amount of patronage can exist within it. I urge the Government to consider mechanisms that will reduce patronage and provide genuine opportunities for back-bench members to participate in decision-making processes. If necessary, they should consider retaining the committee structure.

Where I suggest that there is an important role for an overarching scrutiny committee is in budget setting. There is no doubt that the most important decisions made in local government are those taken at the annual meetings that allocate the budget for different services. I am not

[Dr. Jones]

satisfied with the way in which the system operates at present, because it is based on patronage and depends on which service is in favour rather than on who has made an effective case for more spending and has shown that a service is operating efficiently. If the chair of each committee, executive members and executive officers had to present their case to a scrutiny committee that considered all the different services and took an overview, we might have sensible decisions at the end of what should be an important process.

Time is short, so I will conclude. It has been widely suggested that there is public support for elected mayors. If the concept of an elected mayor is distinguished from a leader who is given tremendous powers by means of an internal election in which patronage can be a factor, I suggest that an elected mayor is preferable. At least that person will be directly accountable to the people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Lady's time is up.

9.19 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Like other hon. Members, I have served in local government. I was in it for 20 years as an officer or as an elected member. For most of that time—this is not a party political point because it applies to all parties—local government and councillors were denigrated. Their powers were restricted, whole structures were abolished and resources were curtailed. I welcome the debate and the Government's objective of reinvigorating local government and giving it strength, new powers, new resources and a range of structures and new methods of organisation and working that demonstrate the vital role of local democracy.

The overall objective of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber is to make every local councillor, every officer and every resident who gets involved in local government feel that they have contributed to something worth while. We were all brought up in the tradition of the Webbs and others who argued that local government comprises two roles—one is to involve and educate people in democracy and to provide them with a voice at a local level, and the other is to provide them with an opportunity to determine what local services should be provided effectively. Local government should not simply be an agent of central Government, but should mediate in the delivery of services to meet local needs.

We should judge the Bill by how well it will enable local government to fulfil those two traditional roles. It could achieve that, but if we are not careful it could be a lost opportunity because it is too timid. The main thrust of our local government reform should be to provide effective local services that are responsive to local needs, not only at a cost that local people are willing to pay but on a basis that they determine. The key question must be how we empower people to determine the future of their communities and how they are governed locally.

I welcome the new powers, which are part of the campaign for a general power of competence that we have waged for nearly 15 years. However, I am concerned about clauses 3 and 4, which take back power to the Secretary of State. I hope that in Committee we will be able to define the light touch that the Secretary of State will be limited to using in exercising those powers.

If we give local authorities new powers, we should give them appropriate vehicles for using them—which includes the reform of local authority companies—and a new resource base. The discussion about the restoration of the business rate has gone on for too long. We need urgent action to restore some control over the local business rate and enhance the resources on which local authorities can draw to implement the new powers.

The new powers will give local authorities the opportunity to introduce community plans. That is an extended power for which they have long argued, and I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has said that she will introduce that as a new duty. To make sure that the community planning process is implemented successfully, we need also to consider what duties are placed on other agencies to participate in that process. For example, the local health authority and the police, among others, need to have a duty to participate.

In the other place, there was an attempt to extend the duty placed on local authorities to include promotion of equal opportunities. The Minister who responded to that debate said that that would be part of the overall review of the Race Relations Act 1976, and I understand that approach. However, recent events have given us a sense of urgency about giving local authorities the duty to promote equal opportunities.

I say that because of the debate about asylum seekers—and I am not making a party political point. This morning I met constituents who had been the subject of a racial attack within a week of leaflets about supposedly bogus asylum seekers being distributed for a by-election in my constituency. That attack was a direct result of the climate that has been whipped up. It behoves us all in central and local government to promote equal opportunities, and that is why we should, in this Bill, reconsider the proposal to place that duty on local authorities.

On structures, we have had lengthy discussions about mayors, cabinets, leaders and managers, but I note, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) pointed out, that the Bill contains the opportunity to have directly elected individual cabinet posts. We need more clarity on that point, because it has not been debated in detail in the other place or in Committee.

Throughout the debate, the question has been raised of why we are giving local authorities and communities the opportunity to change their structures in only these restricted ways. Why are we not allowing them wider opportunities for discussion about different options? If this is about local democracy, why are we forcing the proposals on them?

It is as though we were installing the parliamentary system into local government, with secret decision making, scrutiny usually fairly feeble and exercised only after the decision is made, and individuals frequently whipped to vote against their own principled positions. I understand that assurances have been given that most local authority votes will not be whipped: I look forward to that lesson being learned and applied in the House of Commons. To restrict options to near-parliamentary models undermines the general thrust of the Bill, which is about liberating local communities.

The Bill is also timid in not considering the revision of local government structures. In my area, I want to re-establish the urban district council and deconstruct the

monolith of London borough councils that was erected in the 1960s. The Bill does not enable a decision to be made locally to achieve that. I accept that, under the Bill, local committees can be established, but that has more to do with decentralisation than with devolution of decision making.

We should allow local authorities to experiment with smaller units of local government that can, if necessary, form consortiums to provide services that are best organised across more than one district. As long as the service is provided to an acceptable quality and at a cost of which central Government approve, such proposals should not be debarred from the local decision-making process. We should take a far more thoroughly democratic approach to energise local decision making by drawing on local people's loyalties, traditions and sense of place.

Access to information is critical. Whatever the structure, policy making and accountability can be successful only if information about policy making is easily accessible and widely available as of right. Many reservations have been expressed by hon. Members this evening and by people outside the House, including editors of local newspapers, about the fact that the proposals will restrict access to information.

I should welcome the views of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the implications of the changes that we have made to the Freedom of Information Bill, and whether those counterbalance our concerns about lack of access to information in local government. The Standing Committee should address the whole issue of secrecy in connection with the modernisation of democratic government in this country, and whether the right to information should be about more than issues of fact, as we discussed last week, and should also cover issues of policy.

I should like to raise one issue of participation that has not been mentioned so far. The Bill is designed to increase participation in local government, but 1980s legislation denied many local authority workers the right to participate. It is not merely a question of being elected to one's local authority; it extends to a local authority worker above a certain salary not being able to participate in local campaigns in his or her community—not being allowed to campaign against a local health facility closure, to write to the local press, or to make a speech to a community group that could be regarded as political. It was said in the other place that the Bill would help to tackle that issue through codes of practice and guidance, but I should prefer that the Bill explicitly abolished restrictions on politically restricted posts, which undermine certain individuals' civil liberties.

On the question of electoral participation, I can understand the argument for annual elections. To be honest, it is a matter of indifference to me as a seasoned—not to say inveterate—canvasser. However, there will not be annual elections for directly elected mayors, so I urge consideration of some right of recall, if only through a petition of the electorate or a vote of confidence in the whole council. Otherwise, people will be unable to get rid of mayors who, even though they might have not have committed a criminal offence, have sustained some dishonour or become the subject of public opprobrium. Overall, however, the Bill offers opportunities to enhance local government.

Almost as an aside, I should like to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) made an excellent speech this evening, in which he revealed the homophobic nature of those who have been campaigning in support of section 28. I welcome the opportunity offered by the Bill to put that anachronistic provision behind us.

I welcome the Bill for the things for which it stands. It offers the chance to rehabilitate local government and to re-establish local democracy. However, when change comes, it should be as a result of demand that is locally driven. Let us not, in the name of local democracy, deny the local voice.

9.29 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): This has been an excellent debate, with many contributions from all parts of the House by people who know what they are talking about. A great deal of good will was exhibited towards local government. We all share common goals—to improve the standing of local government, to improve voter participation, to attract even better candidates to local government elections, and to make the system work better.

The problem is that the Bill will not achieve those goals. It is as though the Bill were a metaphor for the Government. First, it is inept and confused, and I am referring not just to the Minister's speech. There were 400-odd amendments in the House of Lords. There was the debacle of section 28 being taken out, and now it is to be put back in again. What the Minister in the Lords, Lord Whitty, described as the central part of the Bill was ripped out in the other place.

We heard the wonderful concession by the Minister for Local Government and the Regions in her opening speech that the Bill was not yet finished. It is a kind of Spanish hotel Bill: some rooms are finished, some have the roof missing, and one or two were finished but have fallen down in the meantime—that is how we shall have to view it.

No wonder the Deputy Prime Minister distanced himself, although even by his standards he went a little far by travelling to Japan. At least when we do not understand what the Deputy Prime Minister is saying, we understand what he means, which is quite different from the case of the right hon. Lady, who spoke the kind of modernising gobbledegook that we have all come to know and love.

Another reason why the Bill is a metaphor for the Government is that it says one thing and does another. It mentions modernisation, improving local democracy and revitalising local government, but it will do nothing of the sort. It is a centralising measure which exhibits yet again the control freakery that is at the heart of the Government.

Both Ministers must realise that the heart of the issue is compulsion. We in the Opposition do not argue that Cabinet systems are invariably wrong or inappropriate. They may suit certain circumstances on the basis of certain models, but they should not be forced on local government by central Government.

The third reason why the Bill is a metaphor for the Government is that it is so clearly out of touch with ordinary people and local government. It fails the Kilfoyle test. It shows graphically, as has the entire debate,

[Mr. Nigel Waterson]

the fault line between old Labour and new Labour. It ignores Labour heartlands in local government. It is a slap in the face for local democracy.

If Ministers really believed—this is the acid test—in all the virtues and merits of the cabinet or executive system, why cannot they allow local councils and communities to make up their own mind on that matter? That is at the heart of the debate, and that is why the Bill is a wasted opportunity.

The Minister began by saying that the Bill was a firm step forward. That is true, because it led straight into an abyss of the Minister's own making. She achieved the rare feat of creating near unanimity in all parts of the House—sadly, against what she was saying. She spoke about crude and universal capping, omitting the fact that the Government have continued capping, in an even more refined form. She spoke about best value, leaving aside the fact that some authorities will face 179 separate performance indicators.

The Minister left to one side the problem of specific grants and the ways in which Government impose their own agenda on local government. She went to enormous trouble to demonise what she described as the red tape town hall committee culture, as though it were some obscure drug-taking bunch of freaks who practised in dark corners. It is wrong of her to demonise the committee system in that way. She must realise, even from her rather limited perspective, that things have moved on. We are not considering committee meetings for their own sake, but streamlined and modernised committee systems. The Minister presented the whole grisly lexicon of new Labour and local government: modernisation, new culture, dynamic, inclusive, empowerment, holistic, transparent, 21st century problems.

The Minister lauded the new power that part I grants local authorities and it is right to say that local authorities have welcomed it. We also broadly welcome it. However, the Minister omitted to say that Lord Whitty made it clear that the new power would not be accompanied by new money. The hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner), who spoke from great experience on local government matters, made a point about that. Local government cannot raise money for the power. Lord Whitty confirmed that in a written exchange with Lord Dixon-Smith.

It is tragic that the Minister has told us yet again that the status quo cannot be an option. That flies in the face of all the advice that she has received, and all the debates and decisions in the House of Lords. She is wholly dogmatic about the matter. I do not understand the reason for that apart from the sketchiness of her grasp of local government history. She talked about the squirearchy who used to run local government. Surely she realises that we have moved on from 100 years ago, and that the committee structure, like everything else, has changed and adapted.

The Minister mentioned directly elected mayors, but we know that the Deputy Prime Minister is "not a fan", as he put it, of them. The Minister also commented on the welfare provisions, which we broadly welcome. However, as with so much of the Bill, many details will have to be tackled through amendments.

On section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986, or clause 91, I can only express our regret at the Government's bizarre determination to repeal section 28. The first manifestation of their intention to do that was a tawdry example of gesture politics even from this Government. They accused those who opposed repeal of being a small minority of homophobes. However, the Government are the small minority. No one outside the House understands why many more hours will be spent debating that proposal when there are so many more pressing matters to debate.

The Government initially said that section 28 prevented teachers from dealing with bullying and that it caused problems in schools. When all else failed, the Government fell back on the lawyers. We are told that section 28 is either contrary to the European convention on human rights or that it does not apply to schools. That will be news to many teachers, lobbying groups for the gay community and others who believed that it applied. As recently as January, the Prime Minister was convinced that section 28 applied to schools. I hope that, when the Under-Secretary replies to the debate, she will identify the wording in clause 91 that makes it incompatible with the European convention on human rights.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) made an eloquent contribution. He said that the Bill would give full reign to secrecy in local government. We agree with him.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) expressed his party's support for our position on structure. We look forward to Liberal Democrat support in Committee. The hon. Gentleman also considered the fourth option at length. I agree with his comments on that.

The hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) spoke knowledgeably about the local government system in Wales. I agree with her comments on the role of women and that of back-bench councillors in Wales and elsewhere.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) spoke from considerable experience. She asked whether the Bill tackled the real reasons for public apathy towards local government. She referred to the problem of best value and its imposition on many local councils. She talked about the "hole in the road" test: do people know who they should contact about a hole in the road in their street? There is a hole in the road in the shape of Government thinking—a black hole. She was right to raise the cabinet system in Norfolk and described the Bill as a wasted opportunity.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) told us about the travails of local government in Liverpool. It must be mildly depressing, to put it at its lowest, for a local councillor to be told that only 2 per cent. of his electorate think that he is doing a good job. She also told the story of disgraceful manipulation by the Liberal Democrats, but I am afraid that she missed the point: that sort of behaviour is precisely what the Bill can and will promote.

In a gem of a speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) spoke from massive experience and expertise. He rightly criticised the Government's obsession with structures, referred to the spin from No. 10 and made extremely interesting remarks on elected mayors and the conduct of referendums. All in all, he made a significant contribution. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) stuck up for the committee system despite its failures, of which he has experience, and told us his real concerns about the executive-scrutiny split, which many others share.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) also drew attention to problems of cabinet secrecy and discussed clause 91 and the so-called section 28 issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) made penetrating remarks about the proposals and, not least, the activities of Southend council. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) also spoke from considerable experience of local government and expressed coded concerns about unnecessary divisions in councils.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) spoke at length about the situation in Wales and touched on the danger of isolating councillors from local people. Good contributions were made by the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), who again expressed scepticism about the Government's commitment to devolution, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who spoke knowledgeably and sensibly about the proposals to abolish section 28. The hon. Members for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) and for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) referred to the dangers in the Bill, though hoping that the Secretary of State will apply some of the powers with a light touch makes the latter the eternal optimist—the Government will not listen.

Why will the Government not listen to Sir Jeremy Beecham of the Local Government Association, who talks of

witnessing the strange death of local democracy...?

Why will they not listen to the Society of Editors, which talks of councils

reducing the flow of information to the public and the media as a result of reforms . . .

and of some councils being "secretive and defensive"? Why will they not listen to the National Union of Journalists, which talks of

cabinets or executives, meeting behind closed doors, which are now being imposed will deny basic access to local democracy...?

Why will the Government not listen to the concerns of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, which says

if being "executive" means delving into operational management then the clock will have been put back several years, and the promises of modernisation will turn to dust.?

Why will they not listen to the Local Government Information Unit, Charter 88 and the Campaign for Freedom of Information, none of which are obvious branches of the Conservative party? Why will they not listen to Mr. Ecclestone of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, who says that

we are now finding a Labour government removing the rights Mrs Thatcher gave us...?

Why will they take no notice of the Labour Campaign for Open Local Government and the views of so many Labour Back Benchers who have expressed deep concerns about the Bill and its central provisions, today and on other occasions?

The Minister of State carried no one with her, not even her hon. Friends, and the proposals do not have a friend in the world, yet the Government are determined to force them through if necessary. We shall oppose them, and we shall not be alone. They like to talk a lot about open government, but prefer it to be practised behind closed doors. I commend our amendment to the House.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): The Bill is part of a long-term radical change for local government—a change that is, I believe, essential if local government is to fulfil its responsibilities to local people in the future, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) said, its potential. This is not change for change's sake; it is happening because the present Government, unlike the last, believe in local government. We believe in local democracy, and we want to strengthen it, to raise standards of local services, and to give people a real say in what their councils are doing.

After 18 years of denigration from the Conservative party, local government in its present form simply cannot deliver effectively to local people. Fundamental change is needed. Our previous legislation, together with this Bill, will tackle all the key areas that must be tackled if councils are to work better. Best value and beacon councils are driving up standards of public service; the power of well-being underlines the overarching responsibility for improving the quality of life of local people. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) that we have already said we are prepared to use section 150 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 in respect of new well-being powers. We shall discuss that in the finance Green Paper.

The community planning provisions emphasise the potential of local authorities as strategic leaders. The new constitutions will allow better, more effective, quicker decision making and the Bill will build into the structure of local government an important and detailed mechanism for the effective scrutiny of that decision making. We will also institute a robust ethical framework to ensure that councils are not only above reproach, but seen to be above reproach.

A number of Conservative Members questioned whether the case for change had been made. The case for change is obvious. I want to make three points in particular, on the first two of which I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell). The first relates to the need to involve local people to redress the democratic deficit. We should start from the point that we cannot claim a mandate in local government if only 10 per cent. of people—and, we have heard, 6 per cent. in parts of Liverpool—are voting for their local councillors. We need to strengthen local government: that is the first main objective.

Mr. Curry: If the Minister has set a figure that validates a mandate, will she tell us what figure would be required in a referendum to validate a decision to change the structure of local government?

Ms Hughes: I have not set a figure for a mandate, but when we are talking about very low turnouts for a local council election, we must question whether local people are really engaged.

Secondly, we must improve standards of public service. In doing so, we must ask ourselves whether the present variation in council standards is acceptable. The top 25 per cent. of councils are excellent, and they are certainly not Tory councils. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman),

[Ms Hughes]

the top 25 per cent. have demonstrated innovation and real delivery of good services to local people, but we must take seriously the difference between them and other councils.

The third issue is the current system. We heard a considerable defence of that system today, and also considerable criticism of what some Members see as the potential for less transparency in the new arrangements. Let us take a moment to consider what the current system involves. Under the current system, reports are taken to committee. Who decides the agenda of that committee meeting? It is the chair of the committee, in consultation with officers. There is no accountability. No one knows what has been left off the agenda. No one knows what is not included in reports: for example, options that have been considered, but discarded. Different party groups meet before committees and decide their position.

The reports do the rounds; the same report goes to committee after committee. All that time, committee chairs are meeting through the day and evening with officers and selected members, making decisions. Where is the scrutiny in that system? Where is the access for the public and the press? It is a bureaucratic, slow and unresponsive system that is opaque and inflexible. I defy anyone to say that any modern organisation starting from scratch would organise itself in that way.

Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) and the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), argued that executives should be made to meet in public. That fails to recognise the real world and what is happening under the current committee system.

The meeting of the executive will not be a committee because executives will be individually, not collectively, responsible. If executives met in public, it would not challenge the integrity of our proposals. However, where executives have decided to meet in public, this is what is happening. They have a pre-meeting in private, which is not minuted, or divulged to the public. The public meeting then takes place in a short time. The minutes that come out of it are equally short. It is a way of closing access to information by the public. Members who argue for public executive meetings on the ground of secrecy are not taking into account what will happen. They have lost the plot. The real mechanism for openness in the arrangements is scrutiny.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions talked about those measures. Hon. Members are right: structure of itself will not deliver all that we seek to achieve. Culture and the way that structure is used is equally important. The views of Opposition Members and some of my hon. Friends seem to suggest that they do not trust local councillors to embrace a change of culture and to be more open with their electorate.

Nothing in the structure inhibits openness; quite the opposite. Everything in the structure requires openness. It requires scrutiny in public for the first time, calling executive members to answer questions in public, calling residents—local people—to give their views or to be members of scrutiny committees, and calling expert witnesses to comment on executive policy and decisions.

Effective scrutiny is crucial, but I wonder why hon. Members who have made points of dissent ably tonight and on many other occasions believe that, when local authority councillors get the hang of scrutiny, they will not be able to deliver the challenge to the executive as effectively as some hon. Members in the Chamber.

Mr. Waterson: May I explain? That is not the point. The point is why the Minister will not trust people to choose between that system and the system that they are probably operating perfectly well at the moment?

Ms Hughes: I do not think that that is very good at all. The hon. Gentleman has missed the point. The system at the moment is not working very well. Most particularly—it is one of the telling points—the current system is not working effectively from the point of view of local people, who cannot find out what is going on. They cannot get access. If Opposition Members think that reading the average minutes of a committee meeting tells anyone anything about the real decisions that are being made behind closed doors in local councils, they are more naive than I thought.

Mr. Curry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hughes: No; I must progress. I am terribly sorry, but I have to make some points on scrutiny to Opposition Members.

The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) said that there would be no pre-scrutiny of executive decisions. That is a travesty. The Bill makes it clear that, at any time, any member of an overview and scrutiny committee, including co-opted members, can demand that an executive member or officer appear, put any item on the scrutiny committee's agenda and call executive members to account to explain precisely not only what they are doing, but what they are planning to do.

Overview and scrutiny committees can initiate policy. They can make recommendations either to the executive or to the full council. The Bill makes it quite clear that they can look not only into the business of the executive, but into any council matter and even matters that are not the direct function of the council.

Mr. Norman: Will the hon. Lady explain in what sense that is pre-scrutiny, please?

Ms Hughes: The provision will enable scrutiny committees to raise issues and to discuss with executive members their intentions before they have taken decisions. It will therefore enable them to consider an issue before the process leading to a decision has even started. It is through scrutiny, area committees and full council that there will be important and challenging roles for non-executive members.

Mr. Curry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hughes: No. I am sorry, but I must go on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston made some good points about how current legislation fails to deliver

proper scrutiny. However, that is why we need the new legislation to make scrutiny really work.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) that scrutiny committees are important and need to be given teeth to hold the executive to account. What we cannot do—it is surprising that the request is made when we are also hearing calls not to constrain councils—is to tell them how they will deploy resources on scrutiny committees. However, we shall strongly recommend in our guidance that councillors consider separate officer support and that scrutiny committees are properly resourced.

The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) said that the debate on section 28 is not about tolerance. He is right—it is about prejudice. Let us set the record straight. Section 28 bites on the actions of local authorities. It does not apply to schools, although many teachers and governors have thought that it does. Independent research has revealed that. I am glad that the penny on that has finally dropped for the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson).

Let us be clear that that legislation singles out homosexual people for differential treatment and forces local authorities to discriminate against them. It is blatantly divisive and stigmatising, and it feeds the attitudes, and leads to the experiences, that were so poignantly described by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward).

Today, we saw some of the contortions that Conservative Members attempt in trying to portray themselves as new friends to local government. They talk about "A New Approach to Local Government: Bringing Common Sense to Your Local Council", but the problem is that they have a credibility gap. They introduced the poll tax, but they ditched it. They introduced compulsory competitive tendering, but they ditched it. They introduced capping, but they ditched that. Only 27 per cent. of councillors today are Tories. They say that they want a healthy mix, but the numbers of women and ethnic minority councillors are pitiful.

The Government present the best future for local government. We are investing in the local services that hard-working families need. Real improvement in the quality of life and in local public services needs dynamic responsible councils, and the Bill will deliver that.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 130, Noes 342.

Division No. 160] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin

Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David

Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)* Wyatt, Derek
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on second or third reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Motion on Standing Committee on Regional Affairs may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL [*LORDS*] [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52 (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Local Government Bill *[Lords]*, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State under the Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other enactment.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Welfare Reform and Pensions

That the Report by the Secretary of State for Social Security under section 82 of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999, stating the changes in the law which the Secretary of State is proposing in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill by way of amendments to the Child Support Acts 1991 and 1995, the amount of the expenditure which the Secretary of State proposes to incur and the purposes for which he proposes to incur it (HC 270), which was laid before this House on 13th March, be approved.

Supreme Court of England and Wales

That the draft Access to Justice Act 1999 (Destination of Appeals) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 22nd March, be approved.

Local Government Finance

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 57) on the Promoting Independence: Prevention Grant for 2000/2001 (HC 338), which was laid before this House on 23rd March, be approved.

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 56) on the Promoting Independence: Partnership Grant for 2000/2001 (HC 337), which was laid before this House on 23rd March, be approved.

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 58) on the Promoting Independence: Carers Grant for 2000/2001 (HC 339), which was laid before this House on 23rd March, be approved.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Standing Committee on Regional Affairs

[Relevant document: The unnumbered Paper from the Leader of the House, entitled "Regional Standing Committee".]

10.30 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That Standing Order No. 117 shall be repealed, and that the following Standing Order shall be made:

117.—(1) There shall be a standing committee called the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs, which shall consider any matter relating to regional affairs in England which may be referred to it.

(2) The Committee shall consist of thirteen Members representing English constituencies nominated by the Committee of Selection; and in nominating such Members, the Committee of Selection shall—

(a) have regard to the qualifications of the Members nominated and to the composition of the House; and

(b) have power to discharge Members from time to time, and to appoint others in substitution.

(3) Any Member of the House representing an English constituency, though not nominated to the Committee, may take part in its proceedings, but may not make any Motion, vote or be counted in the quorum; provided that a Minister of the Crown who is a Member of this House but not nominated to the Committee may make a Motion as specified in paragraph (10) below.

(4) The quorum of the Committee shall be three.

(5) Paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meetings of standing committees) shall not apply to the Committee; except that the proviso to that paragraph shall apply to any sitting at Westminster.

(6) A Motion may be made in the House by a Minister of the Crown to specify (or to vary) any or all of the following:

(a) the matter or matters to be referred to the Committee;

(b) the period to be allotted to proceedings on such matters;

(c) when and where (within England) the Committee shall meet;

(d) the hours for the commencement and conclusion of any sitting;

(e) any days when the Committee shall meet at Westminster at Ten o'clock;

and such Motion may be moved at any time; and the Question thereon shall be put forthwith and may be decided at any hour, though opposed.

(7) Where any order made under paragraph (6) above makes no provision for the period to be allotted to the proceedings on any matter or matters which have been referred to the Committee for consideration at a particular sitting, those proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion no later than three hours after their commencement.

(8) At the commencement of business at any sitting of the Committee, the Chairman may permit Ministers of the Crown, being Members of the House, to make statements on any matter or matters referred to the Committee for consideration at that sitting, and may then permit members of the Committee to ask questions thereon.

(9) No question on a statement by a Minister of the Crown shall be taken after the expiry of a period of one hour from the commencement of the first such statement, except that the Chairman may, at his discretion, allow such questions to be taken for a further period not exceeding half an hour.

(10) The Committee shall, following any such statements and questions, consider each matter referred to it on a motion 'That the Committee has considered the matter'; the Chairman shall put the Question necessary to dispose of the proceedings on each matter at the time, or after the period, specified in accordance with paragraph (6) or paragraph (7) of this Order, and the Committee shall thereupon report to the House that it has considered the matter or matters without any further Question being put.

(11) Any period allocated to the consideration of any matter or matters shall include any time spent on statements by Ministers of the Crown and questions thereon, except when otherwise provided by any Order of the House made in accordance with paragraph (6) above.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I remind the House that Madam Speaker has selected amendments (a) and (b), which stand in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) and his right hon. and hon. Friends. There will be a joint debate on the main motion and the two amendments. Decisions on the amendments will be taken when the debate ends.

Mrs. Beckett: I propose to be brief in moving the motion because the proposal that it enshrines is perfectly straightforward and simple and because the procedure that it suggests is already extremely familiar to the House. The Standing Orders already contain provision for a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs, to debate primarily matters that are of concern to Members who sit for English constituencies. The Standing Order was decided and placed on, so to speak, the statute book of the House in the context of previous moves—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask right hon. and hon. Members who are not staying for the debate to leave the Chamber quickly and quietly.

Mrs. Beckett: The Standing Order was decided in the context of previous moves to introduce devolution for Scotland and Wales. It means that the House has already debated and decided the issue of principle.

The Standing Order ceased to be used after 1979 but it has never been removed from the statute book of the House. In consequence, it remains part of our potential procedures. However, since it was carried, many of our procedures have changed. That is why the motion brings the Standing Order up to date, as I see it, using today's procedures. I hope that this will make the Standing Order both more flexible and more useful to the House.

It will be apparent already to hon. Members on both sides of the House that the model that has been used is that of the European Scrutiny Committee. The Government believe that that is an effective model both in informing Members and in calling Ministers to account.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend will explain something to me. Many of us believe, certainly in terms of regional affairs debates, that there is an argument for bringing in civil servants, in a Select Committee mode, and taking evidence from them. At a regional level, they are critically important in the taking of decisions under the new structures that we have set up. When my right hon. Friend was considering these matters and the tabling of the motion, did she consider a procedure whereby that would be possible?

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, I did, and I accept my hon. Friend's point. It is a matter that the House may consider again in future. That is a point that I intended to make at the end

of my remarks. However, it seemed to me that the important thing was to create or to revive a potential forum for debates for Members who sit for English constituencies, and to do so in a framework in which the priority would be for Members to have a capacity for statements to be made by Ministers and for questions to be put to them. It seemed also that that was the model of the European Scrutiny Committee. My hon. Friend will know that it is widely valued across the House as a model that works effectively.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend will know that the Select Committee looking at matters concerning the environment and transport also has an involvement in regional affairs. How will the new Committee and the Select Committee work together?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which is part of the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs does indeed have the capacity to which my hon. Friend refers. To that extent, there is less of a gap in the House's capacity to look at issues such as that of regional civil servants.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) is an expert, and is well aware that the Select Committee shadows the entire work of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It is not possible for it to specialise in matters that have a regional context and edge, and it is possible only for members of the Select Committee to take part in its debates. That seemed to me the most powerful argument in favour of us using afresh a Standing Order which—I remind the House—has already been agreed by the House. The proposed Committee will be the only forum available to all hon. Members who represent English constituencies, and it will be available only to those hon. Members.

There is also the thought that, as in the European Scrutiny Committees, the presence of a relatively small core membership could lead to the build-up of expertise in regional matters. That, too, would be valuable to the House.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I am a member of European Standing Committee A, and regularly attend other Standing Committees on European matters. It is obvious to me that the right hon. Lady does not attend those meetings often. I can tell the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) that civil servants are present at those meetings, and that they spend their time frantically scribbling notes to Ministers who cannot answer questions because they have mugged up on the issue at hand only half an hour before the sitting.

Mrs. Beckett: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I think that he cannot have been listening to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington asked. He asked about taking evidence from civil servants, and that is not the point that the hon. Gentleman is making.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I accept the Leader of the House's point that all hon. Members with English constituencies will be able to speak at sittings of the Committee, but only 13 will be allowed to vote. Does the right hon. Lady not see a difficulty, in that the tiny core of Committee members—we do not know from what regions they will be drawn—will not be able to vote in a way that allows them to represent the interests of all the regions of the country?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. and learned Gentleman may not have scrutinised the Standing Order as closely as he might have. It is not envisaged that the Committee will take the sort of decisions to which he refers. The Committee will give hon. Members with English constituencies an opportunity to scrutinise issues that are of concern to them.

As I mentioned a few moments ago, before I took one or two interventions, the Standing Order includes provision for ministerial statements to be made to the Committee, and that such statements can be followed by questions, when that is thought to be helpful and for the guidance of the Committee. Hon. Members of all parties will recognise that there is nothing like knowing that questions will be faced, in the House or in Committee, to concentrate ministerial attention on an issue. I repeat that all hon. Members will have the opportunity to debate matters that might be referred to the Committee.

The indicators from the regional development agencies highlight some of the subjects that are likely to be discussed in the proposed forum. Those subjects include economic development, social regeneration, employment and sustainable development skills. All those matters arouse particular concerns among hon. Members who represent English seats, and the forum will allow the matters to be aired in more detail than would be possible in other circumstances. Although there is a core membership of the Committee, Members representing any English seat will be entitled to attend and participate.

There are, of course, alternatives, such as the sittings in Westminster Hall, which provide a fresh opportunity for scrutiny. There is no doubt that that provides a potential forum for debates that highlight the affairs of the English regions. It is not solely a forum for Members who represent English constituencies. It is an experimental forum, but it was intended from the outset to provide more time for the discussion of Select Committee reports and specialist debates on, say, foreign affairs. It would be to lose some of the opportunities provided by the forum in Westminster Hall were we to seek to dominate that by matters that arose solely in the context of English constituencies.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am listening carefully to what the right hon. Lady is saying. I know that we will have some time to discuss the merits and demerits of the proposal in the hours ahead. In the meantime, will the right hon. Lady say whether the proposal comes from the Procedure Committee, which must presumably have looked at it, or from the so-called Modernisation Committee? If not, what is its provenance?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly aware of its provenance. I made it plain in my earlier remarks that the proposal has come from the Government. It was aired in the Modernisation Committee, because it was thought to be a matter that might find common ground on both sides of the House. Given that much concern has been expressed across the House about the insufficient

[Mrs. Beckett]

opportunities for debates for those who represent English constituencies, and only English constituencies, the Government thought that Conservative Members as well as Labour Members might appreciate the opportunity for those debates to be extended.

We shall shortly have the opportunity to test whether Conservative Members meant anything that they said about wanting opportunities for debate specifically for Members representing English constituencies, or whether they simply wanted to complain about the lack of those opportunities—all mouth and no delivery, to coin a phrase.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I believe that the right hon. Lady said earlier that ministerial statements would be made to this Standing Committee. Were such statements made in the 1970s, when the Committee was previously in existence? Is it not right and proper that ministerial statements should be made in the House, and not to a limited Standing Committee?

Mrs. Beckett: No, that was not the procedure when the Committee was first set up. That is one of the reasons why we are moving an amendment to the existing Standing Order, which is thought to be somewhat inflexible. At that time, the House did not have the kind of procedures that it has today. The House did not have anything like the number of Committees that it has today. The House did not operate in forums in which it was possible or likely that Ministers would make statements. We do all those things in the proceedings of the House today. As I understand it, those procedures have developed because the House, as a whole, thought that they offered additional and more varied opportunities for scrutiny.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend rightly said that the proposal was aired in the Modernisation Committee. Would it not be true to say that one of the reservations that the Modernisation Committee had about launching the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs was that hon. Members, myself included, did not want to launch it at the same time as Westminster Hall? We wanted to allow that to get established before launching this Standing Committee, which is exactly what the Government have done.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is correct. There were those who felt that it was not a good idea to launch two experiments, as they saw it, at the same time. Others, as it transpired, saw the proposal as some kind of pro-European plot. So it became apparent that it was not necessarily all that likely that the proposal would command common ground.

Let me return to the point that perhaps was behind the intervention from the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). When it became clear that there would not necessarily be all-party support for a move along these lines, I withdrew it from the Modernisation Committee because it is an all-party Committee which seeks to proceed by consensus. I made it plain at that point that, because this was a decision that the House had already made, the Government might seek to move forward on the proposal in another context, and that is precisely what we are doing tonight.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I will, but after that I propose to end my remarks, which I had already almost concluded.

Mr. McLoughlin: The right hon. Lady says that statements could be made to the Committee. What will be the mechanism for notifying Members of what the statements will be on? What kind of notice will she give Members that a statement is to be made?

Mrs. Beckett: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, especially in view of the honourable position that he holds in the House, is more than well aware of how such procedures work. It is intended that they should proceed by discussion across the House in the ordinary way. We would give as much notice as we reasonably could of issues that could be aired.

The reason for having a core membership is not merely so that members can build up a wide expertise in regional affairs rather than just in a particular region but so that they can begin to form views about what issues have not yet been aired. Should the House decide to set up such a Committee, I hope that that is something on which there would rapidly develop common ground. That is the way in which many of our affairs work and it is something—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry. The hon. Gentleman knows that I would readily give way to him, but I am about to conclude my remarks. I do not wish to detain the House unnecessarily about a straightforward and simple proposal. I propose—

Mr. Bercow: In one sentence.

Mrs. Beckett: Oh, all right, in one sentence.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. What is the rationale behind the first part of subsection (9) of the proposed standing order?

Mrs. Beckett: Without finding paragraph (9) immediately, I should simply say that the whole idea behind the proposal is to create an additional forum for the House. I do not intend to search for subsection (9) now.

The Government recognise that, in the aftermath of devolution to Scotland and Wales, which is an issue that has been debated extensively in the House and has long been decided, there is a call for a forum specifically for Members who sit for English constituencies. The Government recognise the validity of such a call. Or perhaps I should say that the Government thought that they recognised the validity of such a call, but we shall judge tonight whether that call was valid or was in fact merely an excuse for people to complain.

The Government are perfectly prepared to extend the opportunities available to those Members who sit for English constituencies to air specific concerns that arise in their constituencies and to make that forum one that can provide not merely for debate but for extended scrutiny of Ministers, and the opportunity to seek ministerial statements and to question Ministers on those statements. We believe that such a forum will add usefully to the procedures of the House and to the opportunities available to Members to hold the Government to account. Conservative Members continually complain that they lack sufficient of those opportunities. We should judge whether they really mean it by how they vote tonight.

10.34 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The good news about the motion before the House tonight is that the Government have at last recognised that post-devolution there are some unresolved questions relating to England. The Leader of the House confirmed that in her remarks. The bad news is that the Government have come up with the wrong answer. I want to explain why the proposal before us is, first, inconsistent with the Government's manifesto commitments for devolution in England; secondly, an inadequate response to the so-called West Lothian question; and, thirdly, one that cuts across the work of existing institutions of the House, especially the Select Committees and the recently established Westminster Hall.

The proposal for this new Standing Committee has not been put to the House with the approval of the Select Committees on Modernisation or on Procedure—the preferred way of changing how the House works—but comes from the Government.

A year ago, the Modernisation Committee reflected on this proposition, which had been put to it by the Leader of the House. After discussion, the Government decided—rightly—not to pursue it, so we heard no more for nearly a year. The week before last, in a great hurry, the proposition was taken off its dusty shelf by the Government, following some adverse press coverage of the Government's lack of progress in setting up regional assemblies.

The proposal appeared on the Order Paper shortly after the Prime Minister gave a speech on Britishness on 28 March. His speech generated some adverse comment:

> PM rules out home rule for the regions . . . the move will be seen as a bruising rebuff to regions such as the North East and North West.

That was in the *Daily Mail* on 29 March. *[Interruption.]* I thought that the *Daily Mail* was most important to the present Labour party.

How about *The Times*? On 29 March, it stated:

> Blair back-pedals on regional assemblies . . . Tony Blair rebuffed John Prescott's demands for the creation of regional assemblies in England yesterday.

On the next day—30 March—the Leader of the House announced the initiative at business questions. That is the background.

The motion is not a considered response by the House as to how its procedures might be improved. It does not fit into a coherent philosophy of devolution; it is a political gesture, made by the Government to head off criticism of yet another of their ill-considered constitutional changes.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): The right hon. Gentleman is twisting history somewhat. He should acknowledge the arguments that were primarily about the fact that the House was trying to achieve a consensus on the establishment, in Westminster Hall, of a Chamber in which such issues could be debated—as my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) has just pointed out. That is why the proposal was made.

Sir George Young: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady sustained her initial accusation that I had twisted history. However, she was able to insert her interpretation of events into my speech. I hope that she can catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There are three reasons for my view that this proposal is not the best way forward. First, the new Committee would sit uneasily with other institutions of the House, especially the Select Committees and Westminster Hall. Since 1978—the last time that the Standing Committee met—there have been major changes in the operation both of the Government and of the House, which dramatically weaken the case for the Standing Committee.

We have a major Department—the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—which has responsibility for English regional affairs. That Department is shadowed by an active and effective Select Committee—as one would expect of a Committee chaired by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody).

The DETR annual report for 1999 on regional responsibility lists the Department's achievements in 1998 as follows: Royal Assent for the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998; the establishment of eight RDAs on 14 December; and the appointment of the chairmen, members and chief executives of the RDAs. The work in progress included the further development of RDAs; encouraging the development of voluntary regional chambers in each region; contributing to the development of the new assisted areas map; and improving relationships with Government offices.

That major Department of State has responsibility for regional affairs. Within it, there is a Minister with responsibility for the English regions—I am delighted that the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, is in the Chamber tonight. There is also an Under-Secretary with responsibility for the regions, namely the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes).

The House monitors the Government and holds them to account on regional matters through a Select Committee. That is exactly what the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee has been doing. It produced reports on regional air services on 25 July 1998, regional Eurostar services on 26 January 1999 and regional development agencies on 25 May 1999. It must remain the principal means of monitoring the Government on regional affairs.

We also have other departmental Select Committees that cover other subjects. For example, if the House wanted to examine agriculture in the south-west, fishing in the north-west or the motor industry in the north-east, those subjects come under other Select Committees. The proposal for a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs risks short-circuiting the existing Select Committees, assuming, of course, that the House could find Members

[Sir George Young]

to take an active part on it, given the difficulty that confronts many Committees in maintaining a quorum and a good turnout.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The right hon. Gentleman has missed a crucial point. Any Member of the House of the Commons—not only members of the Select Committee—will under this proposal be able to ask detailed questions of Ministers and secure answers. He simply does not understand that point, but it is why the change is so important.

Sir George Young: If the hon. Gentleman considers the way the agenda is constructed, he will find that the Government, not the Committee members, will set it. I shall refer shortly to Westminster Hall, which is an appropriate forum for some of these issues.

Mr. Garnier: I wish to follow up the point made by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). All sorts of Members representing English constituencies may be able to go to the Committee, question Ministers and make speeches, but, whatever the views expressed by those attending, the Government will be able to pack the vote. They will have the majority on the Committee.

Sir George Young: Indeed, and the majority will reflect not the balance within England, but that within the United Kingdom as a whole. I shall discuss the relevant amendment shortly.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet) *rose—*

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) *rose—*

Sir George Young: I want to make a bit of progress, and then I shall give way.

The agenda of the Standing Committee, unlike that of a Select Committee, will be dominated by the Government and not by its members. The House may have considered paragraph (6) of the motion. The matters referred to the Committee, the period for discussion and the location and the duration of the discussion will all be decided by the Government. The normal powers available to a Select Committee will not be available to the Standing Committee, which is further evidence of the Government's ability to talk the language of devolution, but to retain central control.

The House is familiar with the debate about Westminster Hall. One of the concerns about establishing a forum that did not meet in the Chamber but that potentially had a large membership was that it might shift the centre of gravity away from the Chamber and take Members out of it. The jury is out on that issue because Westminster Hall is still an experiment. However, a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs must accentuate that risk.

Dr. Ladyman: I wanted the right hon. Gentleman to give way before he moved too far away from his remarks on Select Committees. Does he not accept that those of us who sit on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee are not able to proselytise on behalf of our own regions? The advantage of the Standing Committee is that we shall be able to represent our regional interests on it.

Sir George Young: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to what has just been said, he would have found out that he will not have that freedom. He can proselytise on any subject only if the Government decide that it is a subject that the Committee can discuss. The whole terms of trade are weighted in favour of the Government, not the House.

Mr. Leigh: On the point that the voting in the Committee will reflect party strength in the United Kingdom as a whole and not just England, does my right hon. Friend recognise that the project may be considered by some to be an embryo—if an inadequate one—for an English Parliament? If that is so, does he accept that it is a rare case where an early abortion of the project would be a great kindness?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend has used rather violent language. We should not make progress with the Standing Committee for the reasons that I have set out, and its membership is one of them. If the proposal is being sold to English Members as an English solution of some sort, the Committee should reflect the balance in the House of Members from England and not the United Kingdom. I shall say a word shortly about the amendment that addresses that problem.

The Procedure Committee suggested that the Grand Committees should be suspended while we wait to see what happens with Westminster Hall. Its Chairman may catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If his Committee wanted the existing Grand Committees to be suspended, it is difficult to see that it would want a new one to be established.

Westminster Hall already provides opportunities for debates on English regional matters, answered by Ministers. Subjects for debate included, on 16 January, shipbuilding on the Clyde; on 14 March, housing in Norfolk; on 21 March, housing in Hampshire; on 22 March, NHS provision in Oxfordshire and the economy of the east midlands; on 29 March, the Diamond Synchrotron and science in the north west; and, on 4 April, prospects for shipbuilding and related industries on the River Tyne. All those subjects are chosen by Members of the House and the Speaker, not by the Government.

Mrs. Beckett: I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman that although as a member of the Modernisation Committee, which recommended the experiment in Westminster Hall, he rightly and honourably voted for that proposal, the vast bulk of the Members sitting behind him voted against it, and now apparently will vote against this one. Where does that leave their claim to want a forum for English Members?

Sir George Young: The proposal for Westminster Hall came to the House from the Modernisation Committee, which approved it. This proposal has not come from the Modernisation Committee with the approval of a Committee of the House; it has come directly from the Government.

As I said earlier, my first reason for believing that this proposal is not the best way forward is that it does not make sense within our rules and procedures. Last May,

the Procedure Committee published an excellent report entitled "The Procedural Consequences of Devolution". This proposition was not one of its proposals, nor indeed did it feature in the Government's response.

That brings me to my second reason. The motion in no way responds to the imbalance created by devolution. The House should tonight be implementing the Procedure Committee's unanimous recommendation that Madam Speaker should identify Bills that apply only to one part of the UK. That would begin to be a coherent response to the English question, as it would open up the way to a new procedure for English or English and Welsh Bills.

"The Procedural Consequences of Devolution", which we debated on 21 October, contained key paragraphs—23 to 27—which responded to the current inequity that affects English MPs and our constituents better than the proposal before the House. Paragraph 25 began:

> However, the current Standing Orders do not deal satisfactorily with legislation relating exclusively to England, Northern Ireland or Scotland . . . No provision at all is made for Bills relating exclusively to England.

The next paragraph took the argument a stage further. It said:

> The main point of principle to be considered is whether it is appropriate to retain special procedures for Bills relating exclusively to one of the constituent countries of the UK, as currently apply to Bills relating exclusively to Scotland or Wales. On balance, we believe it is.

That led the Committee to its recommendation in paragraph 27, which said:

> We recommend that the provision allowing the Speaker to certify Bills as relating exclusively to Scotland be transferred to a new Standing Order and adapted so that the Speaker may certify that a Bill relates exclusively to one of the constituent parts of the UK.

That was the unanimous view of a Committee consisting of nine Labour MPs, three Conservatives and two Liberal Democrats. That is what we should be debating this evening.

That recommendation was rejected by the Government, who in their response asserted:

> If . . . it were possible to identify some bills as relating exclusively to England, it is not clear what benefit this would have for the House.

The whole debate on the West Lothian question had gone straight over their head. It is not that they disagreed with the solution; they had not even seen the problem. The unanimous recommendation of the Procedure Committee would pave the way for the solution proposed by my party to the West Lothian question, and if the Government had tabled that as a motion today, they would have had our support.

The Standing Order would not allow the Committee to deal with Second Readings. The Procedure Committee also recommended that the Standing Order be lifted which requires Standing Committees to reflect party strength, so that the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs could reflect party strength in the constituent part of the UK. Again, the Government have not accepted that. The Government's proposal will perpetuate the inequity rather than solve it. An amendment has been tabled which would require the balance in the Committee to reflect the position in England rather than that in the UK. That strikes me as an amendment worth supporting if we are to have the Committee, but we do not believe that the Committee is the right answer to the post-devolution issues that concern many hon. Members.

My third and last reason is that the proposition does not even fit the Government's agenda. Here we are, approaching the end of this Parliament, and the sad epitaph to the bold claims about regional devolution that we heard from Labour Members a few years ago is this Standing Committee. Elected regional assemblies have disappeared and, as a sop, we are to have a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs. The commitment to hold referendums on regional assemblies has gone the same way as the commitment to hold a referendum on electoral change.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, to deal with the question of Scotland and Wales—especially Scotland and the West Lothian question—it is necessary to adjust the Standing Orders to ensure that those who will otherwise vote twice are not allowed to do so?

Sir George Young: That was indeed the logic of the unanimous recommendation of the Procedure Committee that was put to the House last year.

At the general election, the Labour party pledged

> legislation to allow the people, region by region, to decide in a referendum whether they want directly elected regional government.

The Home Secretary has also promised that

> devolution to Scotland and Wales, to Greater London and to the English regions, greater responsibility to local authorities, far better accountability for quangos, will decentralise and devolve power across Britain and give people a say where one is denied today.

Regional government was intended to break up Britain and create a Europe of the regions. As Labour argued before the election:

> The regional chambers would become each region's voice in Europe and would co-ordinate regional bids for EU funding.

Despite that initial enthusiasm, Labour's attitude appears to have cooled. The Minister for Local Government and the Regions recently described regional government as a "diversion", claiming that few of her north-east constituents were interested. That was reported in *The Guardian* on 4 August.

It appears that the motion we are debating is all that remains of the Government's bold pledge to devolve power to the regions. As is so often the case with the Labour Government, they are all mouth and no delivery. We do not support the idea of regional assemblies, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) will explain why. They would be wasteful and bureaucratic and they do not attract significant support in the country. In my part of the country, when people talk of Wessex, they mean Sophie and Edward, not a regional assembly.

What Labour Members really want is elected regional assemblies, especially in the north-east, to which decision making is devolved from Westminster. However, the motion pulls in the opposite direction. The Campaign for Yorkshire's background paper states:

> The Campaign for Yorkshire is not asking for yet another body, but looking for the RDA to be made into an elected assembly.

The Local Government Association's letter about the proposal states:

> though we welcome greater scrutiny of RDAs by Parliament, the Association favours increased scrutiny by the region itself. If the RDAs are to be a genuine step towards increased decision making in the English regions, the Committee must recognise that RDAs should ultimately be accountable to regional interests themselves.

[Sir George Young]

The motion is yet another example of the Government thrashing around in a constitutional vacuum, starting a reform that they have no idea how to finish, responding to some bad press with an ill-thought-through response. We do not believe that it should be supported and I invite my hon. Friends to register their opposition in the Lobby.

10.54 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I beg to move amendment (a), in paragraph (2), leave out "thirteen" and insert "twenty-four".

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to consider amendment (b), in paragraph (2)(a), leave out "composition of the House" and insert—

"party representation of Members of the House sitting for English constituencies".

Mr. Tyler: The motion is a curious proposition and, as has been made clear by hon. Members on both sides, its paternity is odd. The Standing Committee on Regional Affairs has been in abeyance for 20 years and we do not appear to have managed too badly without it.

Already, inquiries have been made of the Leader of the House about the function that this child is to perform. What is its purpose? Government Members have already suggested that a body with some of the characteristics of a Select Committee would be more appropriate than a Standing Committee; but, as the Chairman of the appropriate Committee has also already pointed out, to set up such a Committee would entail duplication. Already there is doubt about the purpose of the exercise.

I hope that all hon. Members have taken the trouble to read the Order Paper and the amendments. The House is now debating a series of amendments starting, obviously, with amendment (a). We will then debate amendment (b). I hope that later we will have an opportunity to consider some of the other issues.

I have some sympathy with the point of view of the Conservative spokesman, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young).

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: With due respect, I have hardly started. I know that it was said of Mr. Gladstone that he was an old man in a hurry, but will the hon. Gentleman please be a little bit patient? I wish to be as brief as possible, as others want to speak, so I do not intend to take a lot of interventions.

As the Conservative spokesman made clear, the aspirations of many parts of the country, including my own, for some form of real devolution are to be denied this evening with a sop—a stopgap. I know that that will cause disappointment in all parts of the House. It looks as though old Labour has produced a knee-jerk response to those aspirations. As it has burned its fingers in Cardiff, Edinburgh and now London, real devolution is being put on the back burner and we are to be fobbed off with yet another Committee—a puppet Committee with a built-in Government majority.

I do not believe that that is what people want. The Prime Minister promised, not just at the general election but more recently, that we would have more accountable regional government. This is not regional government. It does not even bring regional administration under the control of the House or any other elected body. For that reason, we must study the proposition carefully. It may be just a modest improvement. If so, perhaps it has some merit, but it is certainly not what it is cracked up to be by the Leader of the House or anyone else.

Amendment (a) would expand the core membership of the Committee so that at least a sufficient number of members would not only attend meetings, but vote there, to give the Committee a more effective role in scrutinising Government policy and practice at regional level. Our suggestion is that the number should be 24.

More important still, it would be a constitutional absurdity if the calculation of the Committee membership by party were based on representation in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and even London. We therefore suggest in our second amendment that party representation should reflect party balance in England, if that is to be the agenda for the Committee. It would be totally illogical for those who represent Scottish constituencies effectively to determine representation on the Committee. The Government have clearly made a ludicrous blunder.

Mrs. Beckett: As the hon. Gentleman suggests that a ludicrous blunder has been committed, I should inform him that it has been calculated not by me, but by the relevant authorities, that his proposal would mean an extra seat for the Conservatives and one fewer for the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Tyler: I have no problem with that. The argument of simple party advantage is ludicrous. I well recall the Labour protest when the Conservatives in the previous Parliament insisted on putting English Members on the Scottish Grand Committee. That was ludicrous then, and the proposal now is ludicrous. I hope that we will see no double standards from Labour Members who objected at that time.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Will the hon. Gentleman give way.

Mr. Tyler: No, I will not.

The motion reflects a subtle but extremely important difference in the way in which the Committee is to be managed, compared with 25 years ago: a Minister of the Crown will take all the major initiatives in deciding what comes before the Committee, where it meets, when it meets and so on. In our view, that is inappropriate. If the Committee is to be an effective organ of scrutiny that will make the Government accountable, the Chair of the Committee should have that role, and he or she should be an Opposition Member. Surely that is the right approach. I hope that hon. Members will re-examine the motion.

The proposal's greatest defect is the lack of a timetable. It is as though the Committee is intended to act for ever and a day as a substitute for effective regional scrutiny of the regional administration of national government. That is why we have proposed a sunset clause. Although Standing Orders cease at the end of every Parliament and

the motion will therefore be effective for only a short time, I hope that the Government will not pretend that it is a permanent solution to the democratic deficit in the regions of England.

The motion is not a substitute for effective regional government. Anyone who claims it is such a substitute misunderstands the Government's proposition completely.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman referred to the proposed Chairman of the Committee. Does he believe that the Chairman should be plucked from the Speaker's Panel or appointed in some other, unspecified way?

Mr. Tyler: If we are considering a Standing Committee, the Chair must be a member of the Speaker's Panel. It includes Opposition Members, so that is not a major problem. If the initiative, the agenda, the timing, the location and the business are in the hands of the Government rather than the Chair and the Committee, the Committee will not be an effective organ of scrutiny for all Back Benchers and all parties.

I represent Cornwall, which we do not regard as part of England, but I am prepared to make an exception for the purpose of our discussion. My constituents are entitled to know that the Committee will be an effective scrutineer of regional and local government.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I want to complete my remarks. [HON. MEMBERS: "Go on."] I spoke in the Chamber at 1.10 this morning; I do not believe that anyone wants to hear me speak at length this evening.

Mr. Bercow: We want Tyler.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman can have Wat Tyler if he likes.

Hon. Members on the Treasury Bench want to buy off parts of England that have a perfectly reasonable aspiration in the aftermath of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—we hope that devolved government will resume in due course in Northern Ireland. The motion is simply a stopgap and must be treated as such. It may have short-term merits, but only if it is greatly improved by our amendments.

11.2 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I have listened to the hon. Member for Truro—

Mr. Tyler: North Cornwall.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am obviously thinking of the previous Parliament.

I tried to intervene on the hon. Gentleman early in his speech because in his opening sentence, he suggested that things had worked perfectly well without the Committee for which we have pressed. I remind him that his part of the world is applying for objective 1 status. That suggests that there are major problems in Cornwall. Twenty years of Thatcherism and all that that entailed have left a legacy that the hon. Gentleman does not enjoy. He should therefore have been at the forefront of those who required the Government to table the motion that has been presented this evening.

I welcome the motion. We have asked for it for 20 years; we have finally got it. In 1979, when I was first elected, the first debates in which I participated were about regional affairs. We had to argue with the Government through the usual channels for those debates. They were repeatedly refused. We asked for the establishment of a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs immediately after the election in 1979. Our request was refused. Over the following year and every year, the issue was repeatedly raised in Labour party conferences up and down the country and in trade union conferences. If the truth be known, Tory Back Benchers wanted a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs just as much as we did. I am looking at one now—the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). In the early 1980s he attended meetings of the textile group of Members of Parliament to ask for such a Committee to be established.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I hesitate to counter what the hon. Gentleman says, but it would be appropriate to quote chapter and verse, such as a date and a relevant *Hansard* column. Although I participated in the Committee under the old Standing Order, which I much prefer to the Standing Order that we are debating, it is wrong to introduce the motion as we are still involved in the Westminster Hall experiment. We should see whether it succeeds. I have the honour to chair Westminster Hall and I must tell the House that I am trying to create some atmosphere and make it work.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The hon. Gentleman is a weather vane. Clearly he has completely changed his position over the past 20 years.

Mr. Winterton: Rubbish.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I remember those occasions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) must not shout across the Chamber.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Those matters were discussed by the Paper and Board Federation because we were concerned about the impact of energy prices on the paper and board industry. We argued that we needed a mechanism in the House of Commons whereby we could debate such issues intensely with Ministers, but that was not provided. In the 1980s, we repeatedly made requests through the usual channels for a structure to be set up, but we never got what we wanted. This time we have got it, and I thank my right hon. Friend for that.

Let me tell the House why the Committee will work. Many of my hon. Friends may not have had the opportunity or have needed to attend European Standing Committees. They are perhaps the best in terms of holding Ministers to account.

Mr. Paterson: Oh come on!

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Oh yes, those Committees are excellent as they sort out the good Ministers from

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the bad. In the previous Parliament, I was leading in Committee for the Opposition and a Minister said, "Do you realise, Dale, that I had to get up at 4 o'clock this morning to prepare for this because I do not want to muck it up? When I go before the Committee, I want to be sure that I have done my homework." They provide the only mechanism that I have seen in the House of Commons that subjects Ministers to persistent questioning on issues of which they often have little notice. Ministers are held fully to account, which is why I want this structure to be created.

Ministers will have to be fully briefed and able to reply if they are to appear before the Committee on issues that relate directly to our constituencies. The danger is that they will look inadequate if they do not answer detailed questions. Nothing keeps Ministers on their toes more than the need to impress a Committee, particularly when they are live on the box.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Although I do not agree, let us accept the hon. Gentleman's point about the effectiveness of European Standing Committees. Is not there a significant difference here because the European Scrutiny Committee, not the Government, decides whether an issue is appropriate for debate? In the new Standing Committee, issues will be debated at the behest of Ministers. If they do not want to be interrogated in the way that he describes, they can purposely avoid that by not putting certain issues down for consideration.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Within the structure that we are establishing, it is inconceivable that Ministers would be able to find some way of avoiding giving detailed answers to questions about the northern region or the north-west region. The Government will announce the business of the Committee for a particular day, for a particular region and probably for a particular Department. It could be Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, northern region, Department of Trade and Industry, north-west region, lottery matters covered by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, south-west region, or whatever.

I presume that when those items go on to the agenda, Members—if they are inclined to do what I intend to do—will give Ministers notice in detail of the questions that they mean to ask, so that there is no excuse for those Ministers to give half-baked answers. Then, during the questioning session that will open the proceedings, they will ask their questions, receive live answers and follow them up, as can be done under the European Committee structure that we have already established. Members can ask supplementaries repeatedly, and press Ministers into a corner in order to exploit fully the issues that they are raising.

Mr. Pike: I am sure my hon. Friend does not believe for a moment that, once the Committee has been established, Conservative Members will not press weekly at business questions for issues to be debated in it.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am absolutely sure that they will. Every Thursday afternoon they will ask for items to be discussed in the Committee. Having begun by meeting perhaps once a week or once every two weeks, the Committee may well meet two or three times a week, depending on the nature and scale of demand from members of all parties. The Tories, if they are wise, will be just like us, and use the new structure to hold Ministers to account. I think that they are mad to reject it.

Dr. Ladyman: Let me ask my hon. Friend a question to which I genuinely do not know the answer. What would stop an individual Member tabling a parliamentary question asking the Government when they intended to debate a particular subject in the Committee, and what would stop the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee making recommendations to the Government, if it so wished? Whether the Government accepted them would be another matter.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Everything that my hon. Friend has said is possible, and I am sure that Conservative Members will find ways of ensuring that it is possible. They will exploit the system in exactly the same way. There must be Conservative Members who know in their hearts that this is the very structure that they want in order to secure regional accountability.

Mr. Bercow: Given what the hon. Gentleman has just said about the scope for taxing interrogation, can he explain why, in paragraph (9) of the proposed standing order, the period for ministerial statements is unlimited, but the period for questioning of those ministerial statements is strictly limited? There is an incompatibility there.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The procedure has worked perfectly well under the European scrutiny arrangements; and these are early days. It may well be that, in the end, most of the proceedings in the Committee are dominated by questions. We may well find that in a year's time, or in two years' time—depending on the scale of the great success of this procedural change—Members want more time in which to ask questions. I will be in the Lobby with the Tories if they want to table a motion to that effect: I have no problem at all with it, and nor have my colleagues on the Front Bench.

Mrs. Beckett: Having now found paragraph (9), which I must admit was not present in my memory, I can assist my hon. Friend, and respond to the concern raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow).

The whole point of the procedure, which is modelled on that of the European Scrutiny Committee, is to prevent Ministers from monopolising the Committee by making overlong statements, but to allow the Chairman the facility to extend the period of questioning should the Chairman conclude that the Committee has not had sufficient opportunity to press a Minister. That is what happens in the European Scrutiny Committee, and that is the reason for our proposing this procedure.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: That is a very sensible response to the question asked by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). He should go away and consider the whole procedure again. He is one of the Members who will be able to use it, because, as we know, he is a questioner. He, along with some of his

hon. Friends, will be able to exploit the procedure—and I hope that they will, because we all want Ministers to be held to account.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman talks about persistent and demanding scrutiny of Ministers. Has he seen the official record of the recent meeting of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, where Lord Sainsbury was reduced to a quivering jelly by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am sure, then, that the hon. Gentleman will look forward to many similar occasions with other Ministers, if he gets his way. We accept that. Indeed, Ministers accept it.

I draw attention to one or two issues that I should like to raise in the Committee. It is not only about the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It will cover other Departments.

Mrs. Dunwoody: What concerns me is not that we should follow the European Standing Committee—

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Where my hon. Friend was very good.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I enjoyed it. It was an interesting and useful sitting because we could keep a Minister there for more than an hour, forcing him to answer questions. One thing worries me. Given the number of English Members who would have the right to come along and to question the Minister, rightly, how long would each one get to put trenchant and important questions? How many answers would they receive?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: During a sitting of European Standing Committee B that dealt with agricultural matters, my hon. Friend always seemed to secure answers to the repeated questions that she asked; it was particularly the case on European matters. She was very able to do so. I do not see any problem arising. Anyhow, it is not as if the Committee will meet only once. As I say, it may meet regularly every week on a number of occasions. I hope that it does. I hope that Members take advantage of it.

Mr. Paterson: The hon. Gentleman should listen to his colleague, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). She makes the very good point about the one hour available on European Standing Committees. The most that I have ever achieved is three questions to a Minister, interspersed with other questions from other Members.

If the hon. Gentleman had been at the Select Committee on Agriculture this morning and heard his colleague, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), going on and on and on and on at Baroness Hayman, the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, he would have seen what persistent questioning means. A Select Committee is a far more effective format for grilling an ineffective Minister than a Standing Committee, as we see with the European model.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: We are splitting hairs. [HON. MEMBERS: "We are not."] I am sorry. I think that we are. The Committees provide adequate opportunity for Members to question Ministers. It might be true that, in the proceedings this morning, the Minister was pressed, but there is one advantage that Standing Committees do have; I suppose it applies to Select Committees, too. If they are very clever, a group of Back Benchers will get together and ambush a Minister. That is the real art.

I saw that happen once. It was during a very well attended sitting—I am sure that the hon. Member for Macclesfield will remember the day. Mr. Oppenheim was the Minister. He was answering questions during the run-up to Maastricht. There was a big sitting in Committee Room 12. The proceedings had to be transferred to that Room because so many people wanted to speak. Does the hon. Gentleman remember the ambush? Did it work? It did. That is why the new procedure will work. [HON. MEMBERS: "It did not work."] It did. You got the ambush in. I was there. I witnessed it. We sat back and said nothing. Your people did the job against your own Ministers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman could not be referring to my people because my people are not in the Chamber.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I should never have made that remark. The people of the hon. Member for Macclesfield ambushed his own Minister and it worked very well.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I shall. I like these exchanges.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the 13 core Members should reflect the political make-up of the English regions, or of the whole House of Commons?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I have not given the matter a thought. I am leaving that to Liberal Democrat Members, who have tabled an amendment on it. I shall look to my Whips for a bit of guidance on how I should vote on it, because it is not the issue that is concerning me. I am interested in the principle.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman will have to vote soon on our amendment.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am going to ask my Whips which way to vote—I am very honest about that. When I am ignorant about something, they invariably give me very good guidance.

When the new regional structure and the north-west regional development agency—in the north-west of England—were established, there was much argument about whether Cumbria should be covered by it. Many of us wanted to be included in the northern region. I do not want to re-open old arguments, but the reality is that there was a very heated discussion. Although that structure is now working quite well, at that time we believed that we were not being listened to. If we had had in place the structure proposed in the motion, what a field day I would have had. Ministers would have been pilloried in that Committee and driven into a corner, to reveal the true

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reasons why the decision had been taken. That is only one example of a situation in which I believe that the proposed structure would have operated better.

A decision was then taken, at a regional level, without the intervention of Ministers, on where the regional development agency's offices in Cumbria were to be located. It was small matter for people in Westminster, but it was very important for us in Cumbria. I wanted the offices in Cockermouth, but the agency wanted them in Penrith. The agency won, but why? It won because there was no accountability and no process by which I could influence events. When I tried to influence events in informal proceedings, it turned out to be a complete and total waste of time. I want a structure whereby I can hold a Minister to account on a decision of that nature because I am elected and I am accountable, just as every other hon. Member is. We have to find a way of ensuring that our voices are heard and that we can question Ministers on those issues.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): The hon. Gentleman said earlier that anything is possible, and he mentioned the definition of "regions". Surely that issue really is at the heart of the proposal and the factor determining whether the emperor has any clothes at all. Do regions as defined by central Government exist other than as part of the diseased mind of a bureaucratic and centralised Government? Does he agree that the fundamental issue in the debate is the possibility of identifying regions that are based on real community identities?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the debate on which region Cumbria should be in, and I remember the debate well. However, surely he does not believe for a minute that that issue—which was a great one for him—matters at all to his constituents. They do not recognise the north-west as an entity—it does not exist. They recognise their own county and city, and those are what make them what they are. They also recognise the fact that they are English. That is the issue that needs to be addressed. We are talking about rights for English Members to represent their constituents here in this House.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Those who are taking administrative decisions within the county of Cumbria recognise the north-west regional authority as the entity that is responsible for the region's future. There is no problem about that—we accept the north-west as an administrative entity. However, the hon. Gentleman is raising issues that we are not addressing in this debate.

There is an argument about the impact of the strength of the pound. *[Interruption.]* At Question Time, I have heard Tory Members and Labour Members, including me, repeatedly asking questions about the impact of sterling's high value on industry in the regions, particularly in the north of England and in Scotland. I think that it is perfectly reasonable that we should have a structure whereby we are able to bring in even Treasury Ministers, so that we can ask them questions and to justify their policy on the current value of the pound in relation to the euro. I should like to see Treasury Ministers put under pressure by answering questions on those issues. Hands up any hon. Member who does not agree with me. Surely they would all want to ask Treasury Ministers these highly important questions.

Mr. Paterson: Where does it say in the motion that the Committee will have the power to call anyone? The Government will decide who goes before the Committee. That is the critical difference between a Select Committee and the way in which the proposed Committee will be constituted. There is no power whatever—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions must be brief.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: When the hon. Gentleman asks on the Floor of the House for a debate on his part of the country on a matter relating to the currency, he requests or requires the attendance of a particular Minister to make a statement to that Committee.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Last week, the Scottish Grand Committee heard a statement on the Budget and debated the strength of the pound and its impact on the Scottish economy. In spite of the fact that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a member of that Committee, we had no Treasury Minister replying to us.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am sorry for the hon. Gentleman; he should have exercised his influence. There is a special Committee for Members to exercise influence over a Labour Government, and we have provided them with the opportunities to do so.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman says that, during business questions Back-Bench Members ask the Leader of the House for debates. I am an assiduous attender of business questions, and the Leader of the House says time and again, "This would be a subject for Westminster Hall." Surely what the hon. Gentleman is asking for is already served by the Select Committees and by Westminster Hall.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: That is one option; we are now offering another way to secure such a debate. The incidence of the hon. Gentleman's success should now double.

Mr. Evans: Twice zero is zero.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will get it in the end.

I am worried about the disparity between property prices in the north and the south. The people in the south have a huge advantage over my constituents. A terraced house in London costs £500,000 to £1 million. A terraced house in my constituency might cost between £20,000 and £40,000. When there is property price inflation, the people in the south benefit, yet it is my constituents in the north of England who are putting their backs into the use of equipment and machinery and generating the wealth that keeps the country working.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman may wish to discuss these matters when the Committee is set up, but he will not dwell on property prices.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The powerhouse of the nation is to be found in the industrial areas in terms of generating

wealth. I am worried about the disparities that arise when the product of that wealth does not go to those people. I want to see Ministers questioned on these matters, and this proposal is exactly the structure in which that can be done.

I am not a member of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. I am on two Committees—I cannot take on any more work in that sense. However, when the issue of property prices in the north of England arises on the agenda of the Regional Affairs Committee, I will turn up, along with the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), to question Ministers on these matters. I will see the hon. Gentleman there.

11.30 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I shall be brief. It is always most entertaining to listen to the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). I was looking at him closely as he addressed the House and I do not think for a moment that he believed half of what he was saying, but he made a good case and I am sure that he pleased his right hon. and hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench.

I shall vote against the motion, because it has not been properly thought out. I shall not cover the same ground as my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House, who said that the measure was a sop to Labour's comments before the general election and in their early days in government about establishing regional government subject to referendums throughout the United Kingdom. My only observation on that is that the cost of government under this Administration has increased by £1 billion. That takes account of devolved government in Scotland and the huge cost of the Parliament building, as well, no doubt, as the Assembly building in Cardiff, which the First Secretary of Wales has fortunately put a stop to, albeit only for the time being.

If the Leader of the House wanted to pursue the idea of a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs, I am saddened that she did not resurrect the old Standing Order No. 117, which gave Members from the various parts of the United Kingdom an opportunity on a proper equal basis to participate in open debate about matters relating to their area. I took part in debates on more than one occasion. The hon. Member for Workington was seeking historically to put words into my mouth. Of course I was concerned about the north-west of the United Kingdom, but I did not ask for such a procedure to be set up. I have always believed that we can have proper debates on the Floor of the House of Commons, as we have done on many occasions on so-called regional affairs, ranging widely over all matters of concern to a particular area.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): I recognise that the hon. Gentleman was in the House at the time and I was not, but is not one reason why the Standing Committee under the old Standing Order No. 117 died that it had no core membership that could drive it on and ensure that the pace of business was maintained? Are not the Government right to introduce a core membership in the new Standing Order to ensure that that defect does not recur?

Mr. Winterton: I greatly respect the hon. Gentleman, not only because I have heard him speak fervently and with great knowledge many times, not just about his constituency, but about the whole of his area of the United Kingdom. However, I do not agree with him. The proposals that we are debating provide for a core membership, but I suspect that it will be a controlled core membership that will reflect the party in government. I am inclined to support the views expressed by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, who wanted a wider membership of the Committee, increasing it from 13 to 24, and a Chairman from the Opposition parties. I have the honour to serve on the Chairmen's Panel and Madam Speaker normally appoints two Chairmen to a Standing Committee, one from the Government party and one from the Opposition party, to ensure a balance. As the hon. Member for North Cornwall—and the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam) who is a leading member of the Chairmen's Panel and who is in his place—will know, once a Chairman is appointed, he or she does not take part in any further progress on a Bill. In the case of a close balance in the House, such dual appointments mean that one party is not disadvantaged in relation to the other.

Mr. Cash: In reference to this matter, does my hon. Friend agree with the proposition made by the Liaison Committee recently that the Whips should be precluded from exercising influence on the core membership? For that matter, why not have free votes in the Committee, if we are to have one at all?

Mr. Winterton: I shall come on to that point, if my hon. Friend will wait a moment, because I wish to return to the question posed by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins). Core membership is a disadvantage because core members would not necessarily know much about the subject of any particular debate. For example, the hon. Member for Workington, coming as he does from Cumbria, would not know much about what was going on in south Manchester or north Cheshire. Indeed, I am grateful to the Deputy Prime Minister because he now knows where the Poynton bypass and the Manchester airport east and west link roads are located. Whenever I ask him a question, he thinks that it will be about that issue. My message for the hon. Gentleman is that if one perseveres in the Chamber, one can get one's point across and make the representations that he appears to believe can be made only in a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs.

There would be an inequality in the activities of such a Committee, and a core membership would not be to the advantage of the Committee or the debate. As the Leader of the House will know, any Member from the region in question who wished to participate in the Standing Committee under the old Standing Order No. 117 system could do so, attending on an equal basis. Those Committees did not have a core membership who could attend and vote every time. Under the new proposals, some Members would be able to attend, speak and ask questions, but they would have no vote. The Committee would have little authority. I regret that, because if we are to have another Committee it should have purpose and authority. The proposed new Committee would have no standing at all.

Mr. Bercow: Was not it also fanciful for the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) to

[Mr. Bercow]

envisage quivering Ministers being dragged before the Committee, when in truth—as he would readily see if he studied paragraph (6) of the proposed new Standing Order—it is Ministers who will call the shots?

Mr. Winterton: I would have hoped that the Leader of the House might have clarified that point.

Mrs. Beckett: If either hon. Gentleman looked back at the original Standing Order, they would see that those provisions precisely mirror the Standing Order that already exists.

Mr. Winterton: With the amendments that are proposed, I am not sure that the structure proposed by the Leader of the House will work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) mentioned the splendid report from the Liaison Committee, which is the Committee of Select Committee Chairmen. Those experienced and authoritative hon. Members are concerned with holding the Government of the day to account, and about how hon. Members are appointed to Select Committees. Those appointments should not be done by the comfortable mechanism of the usual channels—I have had experience of tame hon. Members being appointed to Select Committees, as the Leader of the House knows.

Appointments to Select Committees should be made by a special committee of the Liaison Committee. That would improve the House's integrity. Those appointed would be committed to the subjects in which the Committees specialise and could add their experience.

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): I am Chairman of the Selection Committee and a member of the Speaker's Panel, and I am having trouble with the hon. Gentleman's contribution on both counts. As for the latter, it does not matter to which party a Standing Committee Chairman belongs, as all Chairmen do the job objectively. Hon. Members of all parties have felt the rough of my tongue, and that of the hon. Gentleman.

The Selection Committee works in a straightforward manner. There are no nuances or nonsenses—at least, not since I have been its Chairman, although I understand that the hon. Gentleman had a rough time in that post under a previous Government. I do not understand what he is talking about.

Mr. Winterton: I have the highest regard for my colleague on the Chairmen's Panel, who is also an additional Deputy Speaker for Westminster Hall sittings. In no way am I impugning his chairmanship of the Selection Committee when I say, however, that influences have been brought to bear—and even rules created—in the past, of which the House knew nothing. In that way, the reappointment or otherwise of hon. Members to Select Committees was influenced—but I do not want to go over all that again.

The excellent Liaison Committee report was compiled under the splendid Chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). It picks up a number of matters that have been dealt with by the Procedure Committee, which I have the honour to Chair. I do not want to talk about how the House debates Government expenditure, although the Government's reply on such matters was disappointing.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) talked about the Procedure Committee report on the procedural consequences of devolution. I want to be as brief as possible, so I shall not cover the ground that he covered in his excellent opening presentation. The all-party Committee put forward ways of recognising what has happened to Wales and Scotland since devolution. After a great deal of mature consideration and evidence-taking, we did not recommend a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs.

Mr. Evans: Post-devolution, the Scots have their Parliament and the Welsh have their Assembly. Both bodies are directly elected. If we are to have this sop of a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs, is there any logical reason why the core membership should not reflect the political make-up of those representing English constituencies, rather than including the other regions of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Winterton: Again, I am bound to refer to amendment (b), tabled by the Liberal Democrats, which was selected. It seeks to leave out "composition of the House" in line 10, and insert

party representation of Members of the House sitting for English constituencies . . .

My view, which I understood my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire to put forward on behalf of the Conservative Opposition, is that we are sympathetic to the amendment. If there is a Division, I hope, as he indicated, that we will vote for it. It is the right move if we are to be fair to England. Incidentally, I have not, overtly or tacitly, promoted an English Parliament, because I am a strong Unionist who believes in the union of the United Kingdom—England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. I am hoping against hope that the damage done by devolution will not be irretrievable, and that there is a real purpose for the United Kingdom as a whole.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): If we accept amendment (b), should we not, by logical extension, apply that principle to the regional Select Committees of Scotland and Wales? Is there any prospect, therefore, that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) will be relieved of the need to attend the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs?

Mr. Winterton: I am sure that my hon. Friends the Members for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) and for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) find it neither inconvenient nor burdensome to attend the meetings of these valuable Committees which play a vital part in the integrity of the United Kingdom, and truly reflect in this House the needs of all those countries comprising the United Kingdom.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I cannot imagine a Scottish Committee being a burden to anyone.

Mr. Winterton: I know that you do not, Mr. Deputy Speaker, nor would you even have dreamt of it. I was merely responding to the views expressed by my hon.

Friend the Member for New Forest, West, who implied that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham found their attendance and involvement with those Committees somewhat inconvenient and burdensome. I do not believe that they are and repeat that they are a vital part of the function of the House in maintaining the integrity of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Leigh: The analogy between the Select Committee and this proposed Committee is not a correct one. A Select Committee is there to hold the Executive to account and to study the subject. The proposed Committee is about righting an imbalance following devolution. Therefore, it is absurd that the proposed Committee should have a membership drawn from the entire United Kingdom. A Select Committee is quite different; it could be argued that we should all sit on the Scottish Affairs Committee if we wanted to, but this is different. That is why the proposed Committee is a logical absurdity.

Mr. Winterton: I do not support what is proposed on the Order Paper tonight and has been promoted by the Leader of the House. I come back to the views expressed by my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House. The Procedure Committee, comprising as it does a majority of Labour Members, with two Liberal Democrats and three Conservatives, made proposals after proper mature thought, consideration and evidence taking that dealt as adequately as we could at this time with the procedural consequences of devolution.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Is it not right to observe that even during this debate, an hon. Member who represents a Scottish seat has, as is right, contributed to a debate that is solely related to English matters? He has now left his place. I was somewhat hesitant to make that point, given Mr. Deputy Speaker's intervention.

Mr. Winterton: My hon. Friend highlights the fact that you are an overlord of this Chamber this evening, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and you come from north of Hadrian's wall. I can only say that I am delighted to see you in the Chair and you are ensuring that we have a meaningful, positive and robust debate tonight.

Will the Minister who replies consider some of the observations that have been made from the Conservative Benches and the two amendments that have been tabled by the Liberal Democrats and selected for debate? I believe that they make a better balance. Will the Leader of the House say whether she thinks that the extension of the House in Westminster Hall is not also an appropriate forum for meaningful debate on regional matters? Of course, there was an important debate the other day in Westminster Hall on the Diamond Synchrotron, which is highly controversial. Any hon. Member from the north-west could attend on an equal basis.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Or from anywhere else.

Mr. Winterton: Or from anywhere else, as my hon. Friend says. Does the Leader of the House not believe that that forum is ideal for the sort of debate that is to be transferred to the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs? I am sure that she has said so in various debates that we have had on modernisation.

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I accept that there may be occasions when Westminster Hall might be thought to be a suitable forum, assuming that the experiment continues. I do not rule it out, especially perhaps for matters that by their nature transcend more than one region. However, I would be reluctant to see Westminster Hall dominated by such debates, which I fear could happen if it were the sole forum. I am certain that, should such debates draw a large participation from Members representing Scottish and Welsh constituencies—there is no reason why they should not, as the forum is open to all Members of the House—we would not have addressed in any way the need for a forum for hon. Members who sit for English constituencies. It may be that Conservative Members have decided that they no longer feel that that is a matter of concern; I believe that it is.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful for that constructive intervention. It is important that the House properly explores the motion that the Government have put on the Order Paper to amend substantially Standing Order No. 117. But will she give me, my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire and other Conservative Members an assurance that she will take seriously our concerns? Last autumn, we debated the Procedure Committee's recommendation relating to the procedural consequences of devolution, taken with other matters that have subsequently arisen in respect of a further report from the Procedure Committee about how we debate financial matters and estimates in the House, together with the far-reaching recommendations to shift the balance of the Liaison Committee. If she indicates that she will take those matters seriously, I shall be slightly more sympathetic to the motion.

Mrs. Beckett: I always take seriously recommendations such as those to which the hon. Gentleman referred—he listed a series of reports and recommendations—although that does not mean that we can accept all of them.

It is possible that my remarks did not include a point that I had intended to make—perhaps because I took 10 interventions. I had intended to say that I do not suggest that our proposals are set in stone nor that, over time, the House might not agree on ways to amend and improve them. I merely point out that they seem to be a worthwhile first shot.

Mr. Winterton: Again, I am grateful to the Leader of the House. However, I hope that, when her hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office replies to the debate, he will take on board and respond not only to many of the matters that have been legitimately and properly raised, but to some of the severe reservations expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire.

Under paragraph (6)(c), a Minister of the Crown can specify

> when and where (within England) the Committee shall meet.

Can the right hon. Lady really be serious about that provision? Committees already find it difficult to obtain, or maintain, a quorum, and the proposed Committee could take a large number of people away from the House—because the motion states that it can meet away from the House—when other important business is taking place here. Bearing those points in mind, will she pay some attention to my serious concern—shared by other

[Mr. Winterton]

Chairmen of Select Committees—as to the inability of Committees to maintain a quorum when we are doing important business on behalf of the House?

It was premature to table the motion. The right hon. Lady said that the Modernisation Committee had not pursued the matter a year ago because of the Westminster Hall experiment. Although I make no bones about the fact that I am trying to make that experiment a success, it is none the less an experiment. We do not know whether it will survive. Do we need a further experiment that might complicate the way that the House is run and hinder Members in undertaking all the jobs that they want to do on behalf of the House, the country and their constituents?

The matter is serious. It did not receive adequate thought before the motion was tabled for debate tonight. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire and other hon. Members have done us a service in raising important issues that cause us concern.

11.58 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I welcome what is perhaps a timid and faltering step towards the scrutiny of our regional government.

We should realise that we already have regional government. Planning conferences have been set up. There are regional development agencies and the Government offices. Regional chambers are being developed, although their role is somewhat ambiguous. They are supposed to exercise scrutiny, but most of their members are substantial providers in the regions. However regional government has been established, we need to provide for effective scrutiny of it. The measure is not ideal, but it is a first step, so we should welcome it.

It has been suggested that there could be a clash with the work of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. There need be no clash. That Select Committee has a work load that is probably impossible. In the past two months, the Committee has met three times a week. It oversees a huge number of non-governmental organisations, but we are not able to scrutinise them all. There are more than 30 that we have still not examined in this Parliament. Members have referred a huge list of topics to us for our consideration and the members of the Committee want to consider them. Its work load is substantial.

The Select Committee considered regional development agencies when the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 went through the House, and we examined them again last year. We should re-examine them, but it is difficult to envisage how the Committee could scrutinise each of the agencies in the English regions. That is an almost impossible task for us to perform. Two issues are involved. The first is the way in which the agencies are developing nationally and the other is the regional policies that each pursues. It is high time that we found a way to scrutinise them. Ideally, that would be done by Members of Parliament from the relevant regions, and this proposal is a small step in that direction.

The House should grasp this opportunity. It amazes me that the Opposition are likely to vote against more scrutiny in Parliament; that is crazy. I also find it odd that they are worried about voting. How many votes have they won so far in this Parliament? It is not their voting power that is significant. I should have thought that they would want to extract guarantees through the usual channels so that they could at least have some say on the debates to be held and on when they are held. However, they are demanding the right to vote and, presumably, to lose regularly, and it does not matter whether they lose on the basis of the votes of English Members or of those from the United Kingdom as a whole—they will still lose.

Liberal Members have asked who will chair the Committee. As I understand it, if the Chairman is a member of the Chairman's Panel, he will vote according to precedent. He would not exercise judgment in the party political sense. What will happen if someone chairing the Committee behaves as if he were the Chairman of a Select Committee? My experience in the previous Parliament as the Chairman of a Select Committee with a majority of Members from other parties is that, in many ways, the Chairman is constrained by the Committee's members. I do not think that worrying greatly about who chairs the new Committee is the crucial issue. I advise the Conservative party to get stuck into scrutiny. It should certainly get stuck into scrutiny of regional affairs and it should use the usual channels to ensure that it receives a fair amount of the time available for debate.

I will not follow my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) in listing all the subjects that I would like to be scrutinised in the north-west. It is a long and substantial list, and the sooner that we get to it, the better.

I am reluctant to speak on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), but I give one assurance to the House for us both because we jointly chair the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. The new procedure will not in any way curtail or intimidate the activities of that Committee.

We should now move forward, accepting that the proposal is very limited. We should grasp the opportunity and demand that the Committee is used vigorously in the next few months. The Government could undertake that there will be at least one meeting in each of the English regions before July. We could then assess whether the Committee's powers were adequate or whether we needed to demand further powers.

12.4 am

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): I am saddened by the way in which many Labour Members will unquestioningly support any proposal that seeks to remove the power of scrutiny from this Chamber. They will send that power anywhere, provided that the Chamber is not seen to be the place where the Government are held to account. However well intentioned their views on this matter may be, they are failing their constituents and themselves; by following the Government's lead on a range of constitutional issues, they are slowly consigning Parliament and themselves to eventual oblivion.

My constituents send me to this Chamber to hold the Government to account, and that is the prime job that every Member of the House is sent here to do. The Select Committee procedures are effective, and we should concentrate on those in seeking to modernise and improve the House, rather than usurp or seek to replicate powers that already exist and are effectively used by those Committees.

The whole question of regionalism is abject nonsense. The regions exist only in the minds of the politically correct and the political elite; they do not exist in the minds of my electors in Cheadle. They know not what the north-west is, and I suspect that they care less.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) *rose—*

Mr. Day: I shall give way in a moment.

Despite the fact that my electors have been part of Greater Manchester since 1974, they still vociferously defend their Cheshire identity. I heard a Liberal Democrat Member—I cannot remember which one—say from a sedentary position that we must have smaller units that people identify with. I am amazed that that hon. Member does not know that those units exist: they are counties and cities. They are where the English identity rests and what it is all about.

If hon. Members are concerned about making up any deficit in our role, as English Members of Parliament, of serving our constituents, they should redress the political deficit that England has suffered since the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were set up. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), I very much believe in the union of the United Kingdom. I know that the Government do not because the constitutional changes that they have introduced have greatly damaged the long-term survival of what I know as my country—the United Kingdom.

Although I accept that the Scottish people wanted their own Parliament—I do not accept that the Welsh wanted their Assembly, but they got it—that should not have gone ahead without thought being given to how to redress the problems caused for England. If we are to save the United Kingdom, the issue of English rights must be addressed. It will not be solved by setting up a nonsense Committee, which in effect will remove power from where it should be and from where we should be seen to be acting on behalf of constituents—this Chamber.

Mr. Bercow: I entirely agree with the thrust of my hon. Friend's remarks. Surely the whole purpose of the proposed Committee is simply to lend parliamentary legitimacy to regionalism, to give credence to the idea that we suffer from under-government and need more government and to underscore the notion of a bloated European Union chessboard on which this country is nothing but an insignificant pawn.

Mr. Day: My hon. Friend is right. Regionalism makes sense only within the concept of a European federal state of regions, and I reject that concept. I am wholeheartedly happy to be part of the European Union and to enjoy the benefits of friendship and trade, but I do not want a European super-state to be created. Nor do I want the rights of the House of Commons to control and question the Government of the United Kingdom to be removed to any significant extent to any so-called region, for that would undermine the whole concept of the United Kingdom to which I am wedded, and the whole reason for the existence of Parliament.

Serious issues lie at the heart of the Government's proposals. If hon. Members want to know what the people of this country think about where they come from and who they are, they should speak not to people who are involved in politics or to members of their own party, but to their own people, the people whom they represent, and to people who are active in industry. Incidentally, industry in my area is not desperate for a regional assembly in the north-west, nor are my electors: when I mention the prospect of such an assembly to them, they are horrified at the thought of yet another tier of politicians, who might be even worse than I am. That is the way in which the public regard the body politic: they want fewer politicians, not more.

Tonight, I shall, with great enthusiasm, vote against this ridiculous proposal.

12.12 am

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I shall not attempt to follow that performance by the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day), who appears to be arguing in favour of home rule for Cheshire and against regional or even national government. Do his constituents not shop or go to the theatre in Manchester? Do they not use the facilities of the whole region? Do they not go to Trafford Park to shop? Do they not think regionally in any way? The hon. Gentleman appears to be curiously insulated from reality.

Mr. Day: The hon. Gentleman might be surprised to learn that many of my constituents shop as far afield as London. It does not mean that they want to be part of Greater London.

Mr. Mitchell: It might make more sense if, on their way down, they stopped at Meadowhall, where things are much cheaper.

The debate should not be prolonged unnecessarily. All I want to do is sincerely welcome the proposals laid before the House by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. In my view, the Committee should have been re-established years ago, before devolution took place. Devolution is not necessarily a spur to the action, but it adds to the arguments in its favour. It is right that we should have the power to discuss regional issues in our own way and in our own format. With or without devolution, we need such a forum.

Like it or not, we are all regionalists now. Life is lived more widely than the small constituency, village, town or even city. Manchester was once a powerful, but narrow, focal point; now, with modern transport such as the motor car, it is a focus for the entire region. Development must be handled on a regional basis. What Scotland now has creates competition for development and public spending—a competition in which the English regions need to be able to have their say and put their case if they are to compete effectively with Scotland.

Let us take the civilised parts of the country: the northern region is foremost among those demanding regional devolution. I have no doubt that regional devolution would be carried in a referendum in the north-east, and polls reveal that there is also demand in the north-west, Yorkshire and Humberside.

Mr. Day *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Mitchell: If there is no demand for some form of regional devolution, why have those three regions already created their own regional assemblies? Demand is stirring, rising and becoming more important.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mitchell: No, I shall not give way for now.

The position taken by the two Opposition parties is extraordinary. I should have thought that the Liberals wanted devolution all round, but they are quibbling about a minute step towards that. I know that the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) does not want devolution. He wants home rule for Cornwall—an even smaller unit. Just as the Liberals reacted to the problems of home rule in Ireland by calling for home rule all round, so they should logically react to devolution to Scotland and Wales by calling for devolution all round.

Mr. Tyler: Does the hon. Gentleman understand that home rule means rule at home, not here in the House of Commons? Devolution means delegation of responsibilities to the people who will be affected by those decisions.

Mr. Mitchell: Does the Liberal party not want that? Does it not want regional devolution? Why is it quibbling about this small step on the way?

I intend to turn now to the Conservatives, so let us hear something of their views.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he aware that a poll taken throughout the United Kingdom for *The Scotsman* less than three weeks ago, which particularly addressed the question of devolution in the regions, showed that there had been a marked decline—10 percentage points—in support for regional devolution within England since the last general election? How does that square with his statement that there is massive demand in the regions?

Mr. Mitchell: The demand is emerging in the three northernmost regions: true north—the real Britain, in my view. The hon. Gentleman should study the poll in *The Economist* in March last year, which showed a demand for regional government in all those regions. He should also examine the surveys carried out for the Kilbrandon commission in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which showed a stronger degree of regional feeling, a stronger sense of deprivation, a stronger feeling of isolation from London and a feeling that there was a lack of concern in London about their issues in the three northern regions than in Scotland.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mitchell: Once is enough.

The Conservatives' position on devolution is confused. They argued against it in the case of Scotland, then they accepted it. They are engaging in the same process of arguing against advances. That is conservatism as defined by Woodrow Wilson—do nothing and ask your grandmother.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The reason for accepting devolution in Scotland is that we accept that that is what the Scottish electorate wanted. The problem that the hon. Gentleman must face when he deals with regions such as the north-east is that devolution may be desired by some people in certain parts of those regions, but, 20 miles outside a town like Newcastle, the prospect of being governed from Newcastle and dominated by the urban centre is completely rejected.

Mr. Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is merely quibbling. There are differences in Scotland about where the country should be governed from. There are some who do not like government from Edinburgh. Every region must have a centre—a focal point—and it is easy enough to define one in most of the regions of this country. I am referring particularly to the three northern regions, where regional feeling is strongest.

The Tory party opposes devolution and then accepts it, just as it will eventually accept regional devolution in England. The party is staggering around for a response to devolution to Scotland. One response proposed by a substantial body of Conservatives is that there should be a Parliament for England. It is a fairly asinine idea, so it is not surprising that it comes from the Opposition, but that would effectively be like an elephant in a cuckoo's nest.

What we want is regional devolution, with elected regional assemblies and regional government in those areas that want it. It is possible to move towards devolution as Spain has done, on the basis of variable geometry, with regions taking the powers that they want to establish those regions and governing themselves in their own way.

The three regions of the north would almost certainly want devolution and the maximum powers. My view is that what Scotland has, we want in Yorkshire and Humberside and in the other two northern regions. It is only fair that we should have it. We are in a competitive situation. Life is increasingly lived on a regional basis. Those regions have severe economic problems. By any measurement of the strength of the regional economies, whether in terms of unemployment, average wages or gross domestic product per capita, the three regions are behind the rest of the country.

There was an interesting survey in the *Financial Times* yesterday about our competitive disadvantage. In the knowledge-based sector, all three regions lagged behind the rest of the country and Scotland, which has the power to handle its affairs. When such deficiencies exist, it is important to mobilise the synergy of democratic involvement to fight them.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): How does the motion grant the Regional Committee the means to resolve the problems to which the hon. Gentleman refers? The hon. Gentleman's comments are off the subject; they are about other matters. It would be helpful if he tackled the motion.

Mr. Mitchell: I hate to disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but the issues that I have raised could and should be discussed in the Regional Committee established on the basis of the motion. Why are Yorkshire and Humberside and the whole northern region disadvantaged? That is a prime subject for discussion.

What can be done about it? I want to go further than the motion—I want elected regional assemblies. The motion is a step on the way.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Like the Scottish Grand Committee.

Mr. Mitchell: Yes. Why should the English regions not have a similar Committee? I support any step along the way, and I am in favour of the ultimate solution of devolved regions with elected regional assemblies.

I do not want to prolong my remarks, or make an angry speech. However, it is incredible that the Opposition are so intent on looking a gift horse in the mouth. The motion establishes an important forum in which we can discuss issues that are important in the regions. We do not currently do that. We can hold Ministers to account by means of that forum, and impress on them the importance of regional issues. Let us accept it with gibbering gratitude.

12.22 am

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): Long before Standing Orders or the United Kingdom existed, there was a Parliament for England, which was sited on this spot. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) pushes that point aside. The Parliament was a body corporate; anything that happened in the north-east, the north-west, the south-east or the west midlands affected us all. The House and taxation are the means whereby funds are sent and transferred to tackle grievances and anxieties. When the hon. Gentleman fights for money for Grimsby, I have an interest because it may be at the expense or to the disadvantage of my area. Money for Grimsby may also benefit my area if it opens up shipping lanes and so on.

We are considering what happens in this ancient Chamber; we are considering this England. Everything that happens here touches every hon. Member who represents England. When we became a United Kingdom, the body corporate reached out. That means that what harms another area harms me. Parliament should therefore act as judge and arbitrator; that was the theory.

The constitution has been broken down in the past three years. A motion has been tabled in the name of the Leader of the House—it proposes a new Standing Order. Standing Orders form the constitution of the House. It may seem a trite observation that is easy to dismiss, but we regulate our business through Standing Orders. They are determined not by general elections, but by Parliament as a body. To make our system work and to understand why it works, we seek agreement. When we have profoundly different beliefs and views about the conduct of the world outside, the way in which we treat each other is governed through Standing Orders. The conventions of the House are administered accordingly and Standing Orders are developed.

The motion is different—there is no attempt to tackle anxieties. I felt sorry for the Leader of the House because she has never appeared so nervous. She has never been so badly informed. She did not know the meaning of paragraph (9) and was unable to refer in detail to the purpose of the Committee or what is behind it. Is it a new substitute for regional government? Of course it cannot be within the terms of the Standing Order, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby so ably showed with his interpretation of where he wants it to go. However, we are dealing not with where he wants it to go, but with the matter before us. That will bind the conduct of the House.

On devolution, how does one meet the imbalance with Scotland? Everything that the Government have done has been tentative. There have been advances here and reverses there, but the truth is that this is the Parliament of England as well as of the United Kingdom and every English Member sits in it. There is no need to divide ourselves on the issue; we can sit and talk here. I have heard a lot of guff about callings to account. We know what determines the business of the House and of the country—a majority vote. That is why one is always sensitive about Standing Orders. However, I cannot remember such a near total abrogation of due process.

There has been no consultation, as was pointed out by the Procedure Committee. *[Interruption.]* The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, huffs, but he is brand new in the House, having served for no more than three years. *[Interruption.]* I understand that he has in fact served for seven; forgive me. We are continuing the debate about how we do our business and the proposal has been plonked on us. We are being told that a majority will operate tonight on a three-line Whip—*[Interruption.]* Oh, it is a two-line Whip. Now we have it.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman says that the proposal has been plonked before the House without consultation. I first put a proposal before the Modernisation Committee almost a year ago.

Mr. Evans: It was rejected.

Mrs. Beckett: The Modernisation Committee, of which the hon. Gentleman is not a member, did not reject the proposal. It became clear that a consensus was unlikely. I respected that and withdrew the proposal from that forum, recognising that that was not the right way to proceed. However, I made it plain to the Committee that the Government reserved the right to bring it back before the House for judgment in the proper way. In that sense, those words have been before the House for anyone to comment on and for any observations to be made for about a year. It is not right for the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) to say that there has been no consultation and that the proposal has been introduced out of the blue.

Mr. Shepherd: I am saying that we saw no detail in the Modernisation Committee, as the right hon. Lady well knows. We never had a proposed Standing Order before us. We were told about a concept, along the lines of that raised by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, which was our fear. For the first time, we are confronted with a peripatetic House that presumably may journey to any part of England. *[Interruption.]* That is what it says in the Standing Order. What will that do? We were elected to sit and argue in Parliament—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Read it!

Mr. Shepherd: Labour Members have not bothered to read the Standing Order. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) has manifestly failed to do so.

[Mr. Shepherd]

There has been much discussion of regional development agencies and chambers of commerce, but the proposal is not a substitute for the West Lothian question, the Scottish question or the English question. Nor is it about Parliament; it deals with the management of how English Members discuss the business of England. The membership of the Committee will be based on membership of the United Kingdom Parliament rather than of an English Parliament. We know what happened in the past and we should not forget it. A Committee was set up in the 1970s to try to perform that function and I understand that a couple of votes were lost there. It was never heard of again because Labour had an uncertain majority, which may be the case after the next election. The proposal amounts to a temporary expedient to provide today's answer to the West Lothian question, but it is not a substantial answer.

That returns us to the fact that the proposal has been imposed by the Leader of the House. Being Leader of the House means more than just being a member of the Labour Cabinet, or of the Cabinet of the governing party; it means reaching out beyond the interests of the Government. As all Members who have been here for any time know, the right hon. Lady represents the House. That is slightly different from being a Labour partisan—or, as I should say in deference to the right hon. Lady, a new Labour Cabinet Minister. In a sense, she represents us all.

I am grateful to the right hon. Lady when she interrupts to explain things better, because we need such explanations; but she is now taking all the wider dimensions represented by all sides back to the Cabinet table. She makes representations on our behalf, but she is not doing so on this occasion; she is saying that she must bring the matter back to the House and that she must be the engine for the mobilisation of what we are now told is a two-line Whip. *[Interruption.]* I have just been informed across the Floor that it is a two-line Whip. Previously, I was happy to accept that it was a three-line Whip.

In any event, on a Whip, the Government with the largest majority for a very long time—the largest majority for a century, I believe—are forcing through a measure that is not necessary in terms of the business of the House. It should be rejected on that basis alone. Moreover, it does not meet the criteria specified by the three Labour speakers for it to provide a substitute for regional government.

The population of the west midlands is 5.1 million, that of Scotland is 4.9 million, and we have skewed our constitution in a way that forces us to determine that the great bulk of the money comes from England. The transfer payments are made, yet there can be no proper discussion on the basis of the old body corporate—where what affects you affects me—and the Treasury must make the balancing judgment about the needs of us all, as a body corporate—as an England united, or, formerly, a United Kingdom united.

I believe that the proposal should be rejected until there has been better consideration of the issues.

12.32 am

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): In most ways I am exceedingly glad to follow the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), for whom I have immense respect. I am sad not to be able to agree with him tonight. In fact, I felt that in his peroration he was advancing the strongest possible argument for setting up the Committee—and that is just the kind of issue that I would like to discuss in the Committee itself.

I wholly welcome the initiative of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, in the sense that I welcome the fact that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. This is only a small step for Parliament. I am reminded of an observation by one of the great managing directors of General Motors, who said, "If the pace of change outside the organisation exceeds the pace of change inside it, the end is nigh." As I listened to the debate tonight, I reflected on how difficult it is to change anything in this place. How many words have been wasted on what is really a very small step indeed?

Of course we can quibble about whether the Committee has the right powers, and whether it has been set up in the right way. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said that the objective of all of us was to proceed by consensus, and of course it is; but if there is no consensus, can we not proceed at all? Is it not possible for us to change anything without a full consensus?

I applaud my right hon. Friend for taking this initiative. I am among those who, for the last 15 years or so, have pleaded for it, often through the usual channels. We talk of "all mouth and no delivery"; I spent 10 years being all delivery and no mouth. But when I was Opposition Chief Whip, we as a shadow Cabinet pressed the Government to set up this Committee again, although we made no progress whatever. We asked for that because, as English Members, we felt that there were not enough ways in which we could advance the argument for our regions.

I want regional government. I am a committed devolver and decentraliser, despite the problems that my party is having with Scotland, Wales and London. That has not diminished my enthusiasm for devolving and decentralising. I see the proposal as a small step on the road to regional government.

Power has gone to regions. Whether Opposition Members recognise it or not, Government offices and regional development agencies are spending huge amounts of money. Those powerful civil servants and appointees are not accountable to anyone in the regions. That is what the clamour is for.

Mr. Grieve: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: Just a moment.

The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) said that there was no demand for regional government. Oddly enough, in the north-east the chamber of commerce and the CBI are clamouring for regional government because they see the need to control both the government of the north-east and the regional development agency.

I do not want to prolong the debate. I would have preferred not to speak, except that I wanted to welcome the Leader of the House's initiative. We will press for the Committee to grow organically. We want it to have more powers. I should like the Chairman to have the power to determine a private notice question, which can come from an individual Member. I do not like the idea of Ministers wholly determining the agenda and the procedures, but I welcome the proposal. We can make it work, make it grow and make it into a positive idea.

12.37 am

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): It has been an interesting, but extraordinary debate, which we should not have had at this time of the night. It is interesting that it has been sidelined to this late hour.

Conservative Members have touched on the nature of what England is about. Last week, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) suspected that the change in timing reflected the fact that regionalism was not a priority for the Government. Why have we not held the debate in prime time, or is it the latest chapter in the sorry tale of the Deputy Prime Minister's flagship regional policy?

The Deputy Prime Minister's regional policy was only recently panned in a report from the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit. It said that a

proliferation of initiatives by individual Whitehall departments had created a "very substantial bureaucratic burden for those on the ground . . . Too much time is spent negotiating the system rather than delivering."

That resulted in the parachuting in of Lord Falconer to take the reins from the Deputy Prime Minister under the guise of regional co-ordination units.

Regionalism has led to much criticism among regional development agencies themselves. Then there has been a distinct cooling-off of the Government's commitment to regional assemblies. Now, as has been shown tonight, the situation is completely confused by the proposal to set up yet another Committee. It is a classic example of, "If in doubt, set up a Committee." It attempts to paper over the severe cracks in regional policy and the Government's back tracking fast from regional government assemblies—much to the annoyance of many regionalophile Labour Members—by offering them an inadequate sop in the form of yet another talking-shop committee.

The proposal is little short of a panic, knee-jerk, rearguard action to try to address the substantial imbalance inflicted on the way in which we govern the UK and hold our institutions accountable after devolution to Scotland and Wales, which has created a Frankenstein of fragmenting nationalism, as always leaving England short changed, having paid most of the bills. On that, the proposal again patently fails. It is, regardless, not proposed that the Committee should deal with real legislation.

Is it not odd that the Leader of the House has today proposed establishing the Committee, although the proposal did not come from the Modernisation Committee or the Procedure Committee and was not a manifesto commitment?

The right hon. Lady gave a pitiful performance, leaving us completely confused about what the Committee should do. She failed dismally to deal with the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on the Committee's interaction with the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. She failed to tell us what the Committee would actually do. In answer to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) on the Committee's provenance, she said that the matter had been "aired" in the Modernisation Committee. If it has been aired in the Modernisation Committee, it left that Committee in a very damp condition.

The right hon. Lady has yet again made excuses for the Government's sidelining of the convention to make ministerial statements in this Chamber. She had no idea at all of the effect of paragraph (9) of the proposed standing order on ministerial statements.

The proposal is a rather desperate measure that has come out of the blue. It is a desperate throw back—back 22 years, to be precise—to a Committee that last sat in 1978. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) said, time has moved on, and that Committee has been replaced by the Select Committee system. In that system, hon. Members are able to call for witnesses and evidence on any manner of subject that could even loosely be said to be relevant to the regions.

The Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee itself has discussed numerous subjects, ranging from town and country parks, regional development agencies, housing and planning, the integrated transport White Paper and the future of United Kingdom shipping, to name only a few. All those matters have been dealt with by that Select Committee using the current Committee structure.

We understand that the regional Standing Committee would expect to draw on the experience of Select Committee members, such as those on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. Will the regional Committee rank over that Select Committee? Will it make Select Committees redundant?

The Committee's structure is wrong. It fails singularly to address the issue of the English deficit. It is supposed to be a Standing Committee on English regional affairs, yet its composition of 13 members is to reflect the composition of the whole House, to include Scottish, Welsh and Ulster Members. Surely that will only compound the unfairness by which English Members are now excluded from speaking and voting on many policy and expenditure matters north and west of the borders, whereas Scottish and Welsh Members have lost no power to speak and vote on matters affecting exclusively England. The Committee will simply further institutionalise that injustice.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire said, the Committee is 22 years out of date also because of the innovation of the Westminster Hall experiment—about which we have heard so much today. Westminster Hall enables all hon. Members not only to raise issues affecting their particular region, all the regions or no region, but to have a Minister attend and reply to the debate on those issues. Regardless of whether we believe that the experiment is working, that is supposed to be the principle behind it.

In the past month, I myself have participated in three debates in Westminster Hall—on housing in London, the economy of the east midlands and the effect on regeneration of banking closures in Norfolk. Interestingly, all those debates were replied to by DETR Ministers.

Is not the proposal a threat to the Westminster Hall system, and does it not present a prospect of serious overlap? We shall have yet more talk, but yet less delivery.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: I shall not give way, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

[Mr. Loughton]

The motion includes a procedure for matters to be put by a Minister before the House for approval, but it does not include a formal mechanism for the Committee to contribute to that process. It is not clear in the motion whether the Committee should have an informal input into that process, or whether such matters will be decided through the usual channels. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) pointed out, the proposals limit Ministers' talking or scrutiny time to just one hour. It took the Leader of the House over an hour to work out what the clause meant. Under the terms of the clause, she would have been out of time.

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the Standing Order, he will see that it has a number of sections. The hon. Member for Buckingham hoped to catch me out on the terms of paragraph (9). He did so—I freely concede it. There is no need for the hon. Gentleman to make such a meal of it. I am perfectly aware of what the Standing Order means.

Mr. Loughton: We may have touched a raw nerve, but it did not take an hour and a quarter to remember. It was easy to look at the Order Paper and refer to the top of page 1436 to see what it meant. The matter is not clear, because the whole ethos and purpose of the Committee is wholly confused. It is confused in the Government's mind, and it is not clear to other hon. Members, who are being confronted with it out of the blue this evening.

The proposals for the Standing Committee pose more questions than they attempt to answer. I have asked how the Committee relates to the Select Committee structure, and whether it will usurp their role. How does the Committee relate to Westminster Hall? Is it an admission that the second Chamber has failed? We are not entirely sure what the Liberal Democrats are trying to achieve, but we have some sympathy with their second amendment, which would restrict Committee Members to English Members only. Surely we should support that.

Is this proposal a genuine attempt to attack the culture of cronyism that riddles regional development agencies and regional assemblies and the political affiliations of RDA board members? Will the Committee introduce new mechanisms of accountability for vetting appointments to those boards? Will the Committee vet the RDA annual reports? What will its role be in the relationships between the RDAs and the regional assemblies? Are these assemblies now a dead project? They were referred to by the Minister for Local Government and the Regions as purely a "diversion", but are they now dead? Perhaps the Leader of the House could tell us.

It is inevitable that if the Committee is to work under those structures, it will take considerable powers away from the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Has anyone told the right hon. Gentleman? Did anyone mention it to him before he went off to Japan?

Will the Committee have any influence on the way in which RDA money is spent? Which regions should get the biggest hand-outs from central Government? Will the Committee further blur the lines of democratic accountability? Will the Committee promote the artificial regional identity that we have seen? Is the Committee simply a further mechanism for softening up an England of the regions, fit for a European federation of the regions?

What will the Committee do to help repair the yawning north-south divide—revealed yet again by today's report by the International Chamber of Commerce—where London and the south-east are performing well, on a par with the most dynamic economies in the world, but where Wales, the north-east of England, Yorkshire and the Humber area are no more competitive than Hungary or Chile?

The Standing Committee on Regional Affairs is a bad resurrection. A Government who are always crowing about modernisation are now desperately harking back 22 years to cobble together a feeble remedy to problems that are of their own making. The proposal does nothing to restrain the Frankenstein of devolution that has been created in Scotland and Wales, and it does nothing to address the English imbalance. It adds insult to injury by diluting English influence on the English regions when we have diminishing influence on Scottish and Welsh affairs. The proposal does nothing to add accountability or coherence to the Government's creation of artificial regional structures.

Above all, the proposal is yet another insult to the integrity of this House of Commons and to this Chamber, where all Members have equal rights to voice their concerns for their constituencies, their regions, all the regions or the whole United Kingdom—an interesting concept about which we hear little from the Government today.

The proposal is an anachronism; another new Labour invertebrate that talks much and delivers little. It dilutes ministerial accountability yet further. It is a throwback that should be thrown back. It is a thoroughly bad idea, and we shall be voting against it.

12.50 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): At the least, we have had a lively, interesting and stimulating debate. A range of views have been expressed, with no consensus apparent. We have had an opportunity to discuss at great length an issue that has concerned many of my hon. Friends for many years. If the enthusiasm, activity and tension that have been evident in the Chamber tonight go forward to the new regional Committee—if the House agrees—it will be a good Committee to serve on.

Hon. Members will be only too well aware of the recent pressures on parliamentary time on the Floor of the House, and the effect this pressure has had on our working hours. In the present Session we have sat

on numerous occasions

after 10.30 pm. A number of factors have contributed to this. The major one is that the Government have a very large legislative programme.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1975; Vol. 893, c. 165.]

[HON. MEMBERS: "Whose fault is that?"] The House might be amused to hear that those words are quoted from the debate in June 1975. Nothing has changed since then. As was said back in 1975 and again in the House tonight, our proposals are very modest. They are the single step that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) talked about.

We want to revive Standing Order No. 117. Perhaps in the longer term that small step can be a move forward to develop and deliver our policies on the regions.

[HON. MEMBERS: "Never."] Conservative Members shout "Never." They have demanded an opportunity to hold Ministers to account, but they do not want to do so in Westminster Hall; they want to do so here on the Floor of the House, as the hon. Members for Cheadle (Mr. Day) and for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) have said. The Conservatives have learned nothing from their period in opposition. They know that that is not possible.

We are keen to take forward our legislative proposals and to give hon. Members opportunities to raise issues for debate in Westminster Hall, in the Select Committees and now in the new Regional Affairs Committee, but Conservative Members do not want those opportunities. They complain, but they have no real solutions. There has been a lot of whingeing and a lot of talk about how they want to represent their people and their neighbourhoods, but the Conservatives are interested in doing that only on the Floor of the House.

The shadow Leader of the House points his finger, but he well knows that time is at a premium. With this small step, we are trying to give hon. Members an opportunity to raise issues that affect people in their communities. That is an idea that rings bells with some of my hon. Friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) talked about the importance of the European Scrutiny Committee and how it can be used to scrutinise Ministers. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), who is the distinguished Chairman of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, clearly told the House that there was no conflict of interest. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) spoke movingly about the focus on regional affairs and the need to do more and to respond to the voices from the north.

There have been some genuine, principled objections to our proposals and some objections of a more practical nature. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and his colleagues support the principle of the move forward in general terms, but they do not think that it goes far enough. They want a great deal more to be done. Their two amendments are practical suggestions that would make minor modifications.

Dr. Ladyman: Since my hon. Friend is dealing with practical concerns, can he assure me that he will use his influence to try to ensure that the core membership of the Committee is fairly distributed geographically across England? Some of us who represent deprived areas in the south-east wish to ensure that the voice of the south-east is clearly heard on the Committee.

Mr. Tipping: Much has been made of the Standing Orders tonight and my hon. Friend will see that paragraph (2) of the proposed Standing Order requires the Committee of Selection to take those points into account.

The point at issue with the Liberal Democrats is that they would like a larger core membership of 24, but there is not much difference between us. A smaller core membership of 13 would be efficient, and a larger Committee would lead to problems. The hon. Member for North Cornwall also mentioned amendment (b), but the Liberal Democrats' proposal would lead to a possible reduction in the number of members that they would have on the Committee. It appears not to matter to them, but I am keen that other voices are heard in the regional Committee.

Mr. Evans: If Scots, Welsh and Northern Ireland Members are not allowed to sit and speak on that Committee, surely its political make-up should reflect the political make-up of the English Members, not the entire House of Commons. That is only logical.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman should have listened to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), who has some eccentric opinions but pointed out that one of his eccentricities was that he sat on the Scottish Grand Committee, as an English MP.

The Liberal Democrats will know, because they study such matters closely, that the Standing Orders of the House are constantly reviewed. The difference between us is not great and we will come back and review the issue. It may even be, in the course of time, that we will move towards the Liberal Democrats' position, if the present system does not work.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) argued out of principle that we should not proceed with our proposals. He raised the English question and argued that our proposals did not solve the devolution deficit. I say bluntly that they are not designed to do so. Our small, modest proposals would give Back Benchers the opportunity to raise regional issues—real issues that affect their people and communities. Other Members mentioned an English Parliament, but he mentioned a special procedure whereby only English Members could discuss and vote on English matters. I have studied the matter carefully, but I cannot find one issue on which that situation would arise. It may arise in time as devolution develops, and we may have to revisit the issue.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: If the Minister is fair to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), he will agree that the matter has been considered in depth by the Procedure Committee and recommendations were made in its report, which was debated in the autumn. The matter is serious and the Committee, which has a majority of Labour Members, felt that the current system was wrong and that we should move towards the proposition that my right hon. Friend advocated.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Member makes a serious point. He raised it earlier in the debate and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House replied seriously to him. I repeat, if he can define and identify particular English issues, we would be interested in taking the discussion further. However, my right hon. Friend said that we might have to return to the matter. I strongly believe that devolution will affect how the House approaches its business. We need to be able to adapt and change. That is the British way, the parliamentary way: we have evolved and developed.

This is a small step forward. It is a chance to discuss real and important issues affecting our families, regions, people and neighbourhoods. I am astonished that the Opposition do not see the opportunities that the Committee will give them.

I conclude by noting that, regardless of what the Government do or propose in the way of putting Ministers on the line for questioning, the Opposition whinge. They ignore our offers and, perhaps most importantly, they bungle the chances that we give them.

[Mr. Tipping]

I hope that my hon. Friends will back the Government tonight and support the way forward for all the regions of England.

Mr. Tyler: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment proposed: (b), in paragraph (2)(a), leave out "composition of the House" and insert—

"party representation of Members of the House sitting for English constituencies"—*[Mr. Tyler.]*

The House divided: Ayes 130, Noes 190.

Division No. 161] **[1.2 am**

AYES

Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tom Brake and
Mr. Don Foster.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonnell, John

McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle
(B'ham Yardley)
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Rapson, Syd
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine
(Morecambe & Lunesdale)
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 187, Noes 130.

Division No. 162] **[1.13 am**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry
(B'ham Hodge H)
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Ms Jenny
(Wolverh'ton SW)
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle
(B'ham Yardley)
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Rapson, Syd
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine
(Morecambe & Lunesdale)
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That Standing Order No. 117 shall be repealed, and that the following Standing Order shall be made:

117.—(1) There shall be a standing committee called the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs, which shall consider any matter relating to regional affairs in England which may be referred to it.

(2) The Committee shall consist of thirteen Members representing English constituencies nominated by the Committee of Selection; and in nominating such Members, the Committee of Selection shall—

(a) have regard to the qualifications of the Members nominated and to the composition of the House; and

(b) have power to discharge Members from time to time, and to appoint others in substitution.

(3) Any Member of the House representing an English constituency, though not nominated to the Committee, may take part in its proceedings, but may not make any Motion, vote or be counted in the quorum; provided that a Minister of the Crown who is a Member of this House but not nominated to the Committee may make a Motion as specified in paragraph (10) below.

(4) The quorum of the Committee shall be three.

(5) Paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meetings of standing committees) shall not apply to the Committee; except that the proviso to that paragraph shall apply to any sitting at Westminster.

(6) A Motion may be made in the House by a Minister of the Crown to specify (or to vary) any or all of the following:

(a) the matter or matters to be referred to the Committee;

(b) the period to be allotted to proceedings on such matters;

(c) when and where (within England) the Committee shall meet;

(d) the hours for the commencement and conclusion of any sitting;

(e) any days when the Committee shall meet at Westminster at Ten o'clock;

and such Motion may be moved at any time; and the Question thereon shall be put forthwith and may be decided at any hour, though opposed.

(7) Where any order made under paragraph (6) above makes no provision for the period to be allotted to the proceedings on any matter or matters which have been referred to the Committee for consideration at a particular sitting, those proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion no later than three hours after their commencement.

(8) At the commencement of business at any sitting of the Committee, the Chairman may permit Ministers of the Crown, being Members of the House, to make statements on any matter or matters referred to the Committee for consideration at that sitting, and may then permit members of the Committee to ask questions thereon.

(9) No question on a statement by a Minister of the Crown shall be taken after the expiry of a period of one hour from the commencement of the first such statement, except that the Chairman may, at his discretion, allow such questions to be taken for a further period not exceeding half an hour.

(10) The Committee shall, following any such statements and questions, consider each matter referred to it on a motion 'That the Committee has considered the matter'; the Chairman shall put the Question necessary to dispose of the proceedings on each matter at the time, or after the period, specified in accordance with paragraph (6) or paragraph (7) of this Order, and the Committee shall thereupon report to the House that it has considered the matter or matters without any further Question being put.

(11) Any period allocated to the consideration of any matter or matters shall include any time spent on statements by Ministers of the Crown and questions thereon, except when otherwise provided by any Order of the House made in accordance with paragraph (6) above.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PETITION

Rights of the Child

1.23 am

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I am delighted to present a petition from young constituents in Norwich who have drawn attention to an issue that is important to the Government and to the whole of Norwich and Norfolk.

The petition has been signed by 1,792 people and it states:

To the House of Commons,

The Petition of the people in Norwich,

Declares that Her Majesty's Government has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and is therefore committed to children's rights and therefore has a responsibility to do all it can to help end the exploitation of child labour in overseas countries.

It is amazing that young people have such commitment.

The petition continues:

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons should urge the secretary of state for International Development that all aid to countries such as Indonesia, India, Mali or Pakistan where child labour is known to be an extensive problem should have a reasonable percentage of the aid linked to a programme of education for child labourers.

And the Petitioners remain.

I commend the petition to the House and I am proud to present it on behalf of constituents in Norwich.

To lie upon the Table.

Schools (Poor Behaviour)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

1.25 am

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Although the hour is late and many people are going home to bed, this is an important Adjournment debate because it touches on one of the most important issues affecting our schools and the Government's attempts to raise educational achievement.

I should start by declaring an interest as a member of the National Union of Teachers. Before I address the main topic of the debate, I want to set the context because it is important to realise that we have a Government who are committed to the education of our children and determined to put more money into our schools to raise achievement and to introduce policies that will improve standards. In particular, we can see the success that the numeracy and literacy strategies have had over the past two and a half years. They have started to have an impact on the quality of education that primary school children are receiving.

I praise our teaching profession. It is important that the debate sends out the message that we recognise the tremendous work done by the vast majority of our teachers, often in difficult circumstances. It is important to recognise that Ministers often acknowledge that. They are often criticised for not praising teachers but, when they do so, it is not reported as widely as when they sometimes say that there are challenges to be met. The majority of members of our teaching profession are doing an extremely good job.

The important point at the heart of the Government's policies is that they are tackling the social exclusion in many of our communities. They are prepared to take on social exclusion, and not to duck the issue.

In their agenda of raising achievement, the Government face the challenge of the disaffection of a sizeable number of young people which is evident in our classrooms. All hon. Members will have heard examples of that from our constituents. Poor behaviour includes shouting out in class, kicking out, fights that teachers are expected to break up, vandalism, intimidation of staff, increasing numbers of attacks of staff and serious verbal abuse that constantly challenges and undermines teachers and the school's authority. There is a basic refusal to co-operate.

It is important to recognise the difficulties and stress experienced by teachers who are trying to teach a group of children but who do not have the basic standard of behaviour or the teaching environment that we would want them to have. Unfortunately, when schools try to get the support of parents in dealing with poor behaviour, a small number of parents not only refuse to support the school but join in the undermining of its authority.

Recently, we have seen evidence of that from the National Association of Head Teachers, which pointed out that increasing numbers of parents challenge what is happening in schools. It is important to acknowledge that parents have a right to know what is happening and to ask questions but, where children and young people are challenging the school's authority, some parents support that. That is a crucial issue, because if we cannot address the poor behaviour and social disaffection in our schools, we will not prevent the massive exodus of pupils from many of our cities.

[Mr. Vernon Coaker]

In my own city, Nottingham, as hard as some of our schools work, people flood out of the city to the suburbs, where they believe that they will find a better education for their children. However, it is not only an inner-city problem: in other areas, people try to avoid problem schools.

To illustrate the scale of the problem, I shall quote from "Young People", the social exclusion report published last week by policy action team 12. Each year, one in 16 young people—almost 40,000—leave school without qualifications; of those, 80 per cent. were not entered for examinations. In England and Wales, more than 30,000 children in year 11 truant for days or weeks at a time; in England, about 60,000 truant at least once a week. There are 1,500 permanent exclusions from primary schools and 11,500 from secondary schools each year; and, at any one time, more than 150,000 young people are out of school on fixed-term exclusions.

There has been a 400 per cent. increase in permanent exclusions from primary schools since 1990–91, although the rate has been stable since 1995. There has been a 350 per cent. increase in permanent exclusions from secondary schools since 1990–91, although, in the past year or so, there has been a small drop. Those massive figures reveal the scale of the challenge facing us.

The previous Government's answer and the reason for the huge rise was that everything should be left to the market—the market would deal with it through the mechanism of parental choice. In fact, schools pushed out children who caused problems and we witnessed the creation of sink schools and a two-tier education system. This Government will not tolerate that and we will not allow sink schools. We want the best for all pupils in all areas.

We cannot simply tell schools to stop excluding pupils. We have to establish a framework to support schools and teachers as they try to deal with the problems. If we are to raise standards, teachers must be able to teach in an effective learning environment, and pupils must be able to learn. We cannot allow a small minority to deprive the majority in the classroom of their entitlement to an education. Parents understand the problems that some individual pupils have, but their view is that those problems must not be dealt with at the expense of the minority of pupils and in a way that undermines the authority of teachers.

Effective head teachers, good management and good-quality staff are key factors, but so are better training and implementation of sound policies to tackle the problems. If fresh start initiatives, city academies and our efforts to raise the achievement of all pupils in all schools in all areas are to succeed, we have to meet the challenge head on. In addition to improving teachers' training in dealing with difficult situations, we have to increase the number of learning support units in schools.

We should not underestimate the extent of the problem. There are problems with a small number of pupils not only in the inner cities, but in almost all our schools. If we are serious about raising standards right across the ability range, learning support units must be available to every school, whether they are provided in the school or whether schools have a collaborative arrangement. Every school in the country needs access to a learning support unit.

Pupils who are persistently disruptive or violent and who simply refuse to co-operate need a learning support unit off-site, not as a dumping ground—that was the policy of the Conservatives, who were prepared to throw difficult pupils out and were not worried where they went—but as a unit where an alternative curriculum can be offered and individual counselling can take place, with the aim of re-integrating those young people back into mainstream education. The objective should be their return to ordinary classrooms when they have learned to act in a way that is consistent with effective learning.

If we set up a system of learning support units across the country, that would make a real difference not only to the education of the young people concerned, but to the morale of the teaching profession, who would see the Government acting to support teachers in their schools.

There is an issue for society as well as for Government. One of the main problems in our schools and in society is that there has been an erosion of respect for what I call legitimate authority, whether that is represented by a police officer or a teacher. As a Government, we need to consider how we can restore legitimate authority to schools, head teachers and teachers, so that we get back the respect that many of us remember from our school days. Our parents often told us about the respect that the school teacher enjoyed in the community.

All parents want and demand decent education for their children. If we can start to restore authority to the teaching profession, we will have done a great service to the country. We must do that by working with parents and local authorities. We must lay down what is acceptable and hold to it, even when the rules and standards of behaviour in a school are challenged.

It is up to us as a Government to send out a clear message to our teachers and schools that, where they are sensibly implementing standards of behaviour and codes of conduct in a school which are designed to create an effective learning environment and to provide teachers and schools with the authority that they need, the Government will support them. We must reiterate that to teachers.

When I was a deputy head teacher and we had to enforce the uniform code, there were parents who asked why their children should wear a uniform to school and challenged our authority to impose a uniform. We must support schools in such circumstances. If a school has determined with parents that a school uniform and certain codes of behaviour are required, that should be respected by those who attend the school. If we do not enforce that, it will undermine the authority of the teacher and the school, and their efforts to create a learning environment.

The Government are concerned about rights for individuals, and also about responsibilities. They have an agenda to raise achievement, to put more resources into schools and to modernise the comprehensive principle. If we ensure that we create in all our schools—rural, inner city or suburban—the learning environment that is essential to achievement by all our pupils, we will raise achievement right across the spectrum of ability.

What a radical, hugely satisfying achievement that would be: city schools to which people flocked and to which, because they were beacons of excellence in their communities, they wanted to send their children. Education would play a part in regenerating communities that have been neglected for so long. We face that

challenge. To meet it, we must recognise that teachers in many of our schools face genuine difficulties in tackling the challenging behaviour of some young people. If we support teachers, we can raise standards together.

1.40 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) for his thoughtful speech. Despite the lateness of the hour, we always have higher quality debates when hon. Members bring the benefit of experience—as my hon. Friend does—to them, or when they represent their constituents' interests in the same hard-working, conscientious way as my hon. Friend.

We are determined to raise standards for all pupils. Children get only one chance at school, and they and their teachers have the right not to have that chance disrupted by other pupils' behaviour. I hope that the debate will send that clear message. I strongly endorse my hon. Friend's commendation of our teachers' excellent work, in sometimes difficult and challenging circumstances, with difficult children. I hope that our debate will also convey that clear message.

We have an overall strategy for tackling poor behaviour and preventing exclusion. It is backed up by generous amounts of funding. The key to avoiding disaffection and disruption is early intervention and prevention through multi-agency working and partnership with parents.

How are we helping to achieve that? The Government have provided nearly £500 million over three years through the "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" grant for preventive work. Funding in 2000–01 will be £140 million—that is 110 per cent. higher than in 1999–2000. The requirement to devolve the grant to secondary schools in 2000–01 will offer schools throughout the country a better way of tackling developing problems at their root. My hon. Friend rightly suggested that that was important.

The money will be supported by the "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" guidance, which was sent to schools and local education authorities last July. It is important to stress that the guidance is a joint publication between the Department of Health, the Home Office and the social exclusion unit. That emphasises, as my hon. Friend did, the need for a joined-up approach to poor behaviour in schools, and the realisation that such problems are often closely linked to wider problems in the home and in society. It is essential that different agencies, for example, social services departments and youth offending teams as well as local education authorities and schools, work together effectively to tackle the problems that affect a child.

Schools and teachers are not responsible for social exclusion, but they have to deal with its effects every day. That is why Government policy on crime reduction, community renewal and developing parental skills and responsibilities has a key role to play. My hon. Friend has contributed to that through his proposals on curfews.

Teachers need and deserve practical support. That is why the guidance includes case studies and examples of good practice in managing poor behaviour. It recommends a range of practical strategies that have been shown to work, including, as my hon. Friend pointed out, in-school learning support units for disruptive pupils, which have been funded by the "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" grant. They provide separate, short-term teaching, which is tailored to the needs of difficult pupils while preventing disruption to normal classes and the need for exclusion. Research that the Department published last October shows that the units were successful in reducing exclusions and that they were also cost-effective.

The guidance also recommends innovative multi-agency pastoral support programmes. The pastoral support programme is a practical intervention to focus a school, together with support agencies, on early intervention for pupils at serious risk of permanent exclusion or criminal activity. It offers designated support when pupils have failed to respond to other interventions. The pupil should be set short-term targets broken down into fortnightly tasks and the PSP should be reviewed halfway through its agreed duration. That practical support is the background to our target to reduce exclusions and truancy.

The social exclusion unit report "Truancy and School Exclusion" sets targets to reduce truancy and exclusion by a third by 2002. We believe that our goal of raising standards is achievable only if children are in school and learning. However, that does not mean that exclusion can never be an option. We have never pretended that that is the case and recently confirmed that a head teacher can exclude a pupil for a serious offence—a violent incident, for example—without first needing to implement alternative strategies. As my hon. Friend said, head teachers must make the decisions about exclusions. There was no action or practical support under the previous Government and exclusions rose, but we are providing the support and the money for schools to be able to achieve that reduction.

Successive reports by Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools have found that most schools are orderly and that violence is fortunately rare. Our teachers and school managers deserve congratulations on that. Certain schools face greater than average problems of indiscipline or bullying and their teachers need additional advice and support. I agree with my hon. Friend that such problems occur especially, although not exclusively, in deprived inner-city areas. We have recognised the wider problems facing teachers and pupils and are putting more resources than ever before into on-site units for disruptive pupils.

In addition, we are supporting more work-related learning for 14 and 15-year-olds to reduce disaffection. The Department has funded 36 work-related learning projects at key stage 4, and early evidence shows that unauthorised absence rates have been reduced from above average to below. At a project in Leicester, a student who attended 49 per cent. of year 8 attended 97 per cent. of an off-site placement in year 11. We are putting many more learning mentors in secondary schools so that pupils who need help will get it to overcome barriers to their individual learning. There are early indications of the success of that strategy. For example, a learning mentor at a school in Southwark is involved in counselling, running programmes to improve behaviour, running a sports leadership award scheme for disaffected pupils and working closely with parents.

Our aim in those strategies is to tackle the causes of the problem, not to transfer it from one school to another or out on to the streets, as the previous Government were willing to do. That is why we are funding the learning mentors as well as the additional learning support units

[Jacqui Smith]

through the excellence in cities initiative. It currently operates in 24 local education authorities that form some of the most disadvantaged inner-city areas.

On 23 March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced an expansion of the initiative to 21 new local education authorities from September and among the additional cities to be included are Nottingham, Leicester, Stoke-on-Trent and Hull. Aspects of the initiative will be piloted in primary schools in the existing inner-city areas. If our objective is early intervention, we should recognise that primary schools are affected as well.

Poor behaviour can also be a problem for other children. Bullying is a serious problem, and much of it goes unreported. It can seriously affect a child's emotional well-being and educational achievement. We attach a high priority to helping schools to prevent and combat bullying in all its forms, because there is no excuse for it. It is disruptive and intolerable, and should have no place in our schools. Since last September, schools have been required by law to have an anti-bullying policy. Further advice on bullying and harassment was contained in our "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" guidance.

We shall also shortly be launching a new anti-bullying initiative. We shall be updating and reissuing our anti-bullying pack for schools, and producing a video for them to use as a teaching resource to generate discussion of the problem. It will emphasise the simple but powerful message that pupils need not suffer in silence, but should speak out and let someone know. We may not be able to eliminate bullying completely, but everyone needs to work together to reduce and prevent it wherever possible. We should not allow the misery and disruption caused by bullying in our schools to go unchallenged; as my hon. Friend said, the stakes are too high in the context of our children's education and achievements.

We are also very concerned about the rate of unauthorised absence from school. My hon. Friend mentioned that as well. The 1999 Audit Commission report "Missing Out" showed very mixed approaches on the part of local education authorities to the tackling of truancy. Some performed very well, while others did less well. We need to respond to the challenge.

Schools themselves must actively discourage truancy, and they need support to be able to do that. Our guidance recommended that schools should report unauthorised absence to parents on the morning on which it occurs. That sometimes presents a practical challenge, but it has been shown to help in increasing attendance. We hope that the "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" money can be used for that purpose as well.

Following consultation on our "Tackling Truancy Together" strategy document last autumn, we recently announced that the level of fines for parents of truanting pupils would increase to level 4 of the national scale of penalties. That will, in particular, allow magistrates to require parents to attend court or risk arrest, and will give them more opportunity to emphasise the seriousness of the offence to parents. I agree with my hon. Friend that the community and parents have both a right to expect schools to deliver a high standard of education and a responsibility to ensure that children attend schools, and to support the policies implemented by them.

I do not minimise the task that teachers must perform in deciding on appropriate strategies for the management of pupils. I know my hon. Friend is aware of that, given his extensive experience in the teaching profession. Although the Department has provided detailed guidance, it is for heads and other teachers to apply it to the circumstances of their schools.

I agree with my hon. Friend that inexperienced teachers need training and help from more experienced teachers, although if experienced teachers occasionally experience difficulties they should not see that as a sign of personal failure. Initial teacher training should focus on issues of discipline, and how to tackle disaffection.

Because this is essentially a two-way process, my officials—with assistance from the National Children's Bureau, and other Government Departments—are currently involved in disseminating the key recommendations of "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" guidance, in order to give schools and teachers the practical support and assistance that will enable them to cope with the problems.

We can lead as a Government by setting the framework, but we cannot do everything that is needed. We can provide the resources that are important, but in the end it will be for schools and local partners across the country to work together to achieve the goal of higher standards for our young people.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Two o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 12 April 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER).*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Wednesday 19 April.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Education Funding

1. **Mr. Roy Beggs** (East Antrim): How Northern Ireland schools and colleges will benefit from the additional funding for education announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer; and if he will make a statement. [117340]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): As you are aware, Madam Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State cannot be here today, because he is attending the Queen at Hillsborough as she awards the George Cross to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I am sure the whole House will join me in welcoming that honour: it is richly deserved, given the RUC's dedication and courage, and a fitting tribute to the 302 officers who have lost their lives.

I announced on 6 April that additional resources totalling £14.7 million were being distributed to primary, post-primary and special schools for the current financial year, largely on the basis of pupil numbers. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is consulting Northern Ireland political parties on how further resources might be deployed, and I hope to be able to make a further announcement shortly.

Mr. Beggs: I echo the Minister's opening remarks, and thank him for his reply. I regret to say, however, that the additional funds will not solve the problems in Northern Ireland. School governors throughout the Province experience great difficulty in managing within their budget allocations, especially when teachers are on the top salary scales. Many well-managed schools are in deficit for the first time, and are cutting the services that they used to provide for pupils. Will the Minister further review funding for our schools, and undertake to meet the full cost of teacher salaries at each school?

Mr. Howarth: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the sum to which I referred is the additional amount earmarked specifically for schools in the Chancellor's Budget statement, and it will go directly to them. The hon. Gentleman will probably also know that an extra £18.8 million is to be distributed across the public services in Northern Ireland. He will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is consulting party leaders on where priorities should lie with regard to the extra money, and I am sure that what he has said, as well as other competing demands, will be taken into account.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the RUC, and those members of it who have impartially upheld the rule of law over the past 30 years. Is he aware, however, that beneath that umbrella of congratulations are those who stood idly by while Belfast was burned and the ghettos were bombed, and those for whom a former Secretary of State and Attorney-General had to use the royal prerogative to prevent them from being prosecuted for perverting the course of justice—

Hon. Members: Question!

Madam Speaker: Order. Has the hon. Gentleman a question that relates to the substantive question on the Order Paper, on education? If so, I should be pleased to hear it.

Mr. McNamara: I have, Madam Speaker; but, given my hon. Friend's introduction, and given that Robert Hamill was kicked to death in the presence of RUC officers who did not intervene, it must be seen that the award is a matter of controversy. While we applaud all RUC members who impartially uphold the rule of law, those who did not should not be covered by that.

As for the substantive question, will my hon. Friend arrange for schools to publish the details of how they are spending the extra money? There is concern about that.

Mr. Howarth: Schools will, of course, be asked to account for the £14.7 million. However, the reason why we gave the money directly to schools was to enable them to decide for themselves what their priorities should be. Although we hold them accountable for the way in which they spend public money, it would not be appropriate at this point for us to direct their resources. As for the additional expenditure, it will be in line with the public spending priorities set by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, following consultation on what those priorities should be.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Has the spending increase proposed for Northern Ireland been subjected to the same double and triple counting by Government as has applied in relation to both England and Wales?

Mr. Howarth: As the hon. Gentleman's premise is entirely false, it would be inappropriate for me to answer in terms.

Executive

2. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): What progress has been made in re-establishing the Northern Ireland Executive. [117372]

5. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What progress has been made in re-establishing the Northern Ireland Executive. [117375]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): We are currently engaged in discussions with the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland political parties to agree on a way forward that will enable the Executive and other institutions to be restored as soon as possible. Our aim is to achieve an understanding that will provide the cross-community confidence that is necessary to enable the restored institutions to work effectively for the benefit of all people in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Boswell: I thank the Minister for his response, but may I ask him for two parallel and linked assurances? First, will he assure us that he and his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be tireless in exploring all avenues that might lead to the re-establishment of the Executive? Secondly, will he assure us that he will not seek to involve any persons who have not been able to establish, by their actions as well as their words, that they are genuinely committed to a peaceful solution?

Mr. Howarth: On the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, of course the Secretary of State and I, and our colleagues in the Government of the Republic of Ireland, are deeply committed to that. No stone will be left unturned as we try to find out how we can progress matters. I know that there is, if not complete support, then wide support throughout the House for that position. The coming weeks will be difficult; no one pretends otherwise—but I still believe that, with good will and above all some understanding for everyone's position, there is an opportunity for us to achieve something.

It is important that everyone, including those who have links with terrorist organisations, or who have had such links in the past, understand clearly that the only way forward involves no violence, but instead, politics. Through politics, we can make it work. Through violence, the only way is backwards.

Mr. Swayne: Given that the Executive failed because of the inability to secure meaningful decommissioning, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Executive cannot be re-established until decommissioning is achieved? If that is the case, is he sure of the wisdom of his policy of continuing prisoner releases, because those prisoners might be the leverage by which he would achieve the decommissioning necessary?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is aware that prisoner releases is a difficult issue. The issue has been difficult for everyone to deal with and to face up to, but in the agreement there is no direct link between prisoner releases and decommissioning.

The Secretary of State rightly takes the view that prisoner releases will be judged on the merit of each case and on the basis of the prevailing security circumstances at any given time, but the hon. Gentleman made a fair point within his question. If we want politics to work, private armies must be removed from the equation.

Decommissioning is still most likely to happen in the context of the implementation of the whole agreement, including the restoration of the institutions. That, in its turn, is most likely to happen if there is genuine confidence on everyone's part that decommissioning will happen in good time and that the threat of violence has been removed for good. Only the IRA can create the confidence by making the position clear with an unmistakeable signal of peaceful intentions. I hope that it will do that.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): As too many people would like the Good Friday agreement to be dead, and numerous people fear that it may be, can my hon. Friend give any reassurance based on discussions that he has had with the Government of the Republic of Ireland?

Mr. Howarth: It is important that we emphasise that the Government of the Republic of Ireland are a very important partner in the undertaking. We keep close contact with them and respect very much their input to the process.

My hon. Friend makes the point that some people would like the process to fail. I have no doubt at all that she is right, but, by the same token, no one in Northern Ireland wants to go back to the situation before the peace process started and before the Good Friday agreement.

It is my view that most people in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, in the House, have too much invested and too much to lose if the process fails. I believe that most people of good will want the process to work and to move forward. I just hope that, over the coming days and weeks, we can find a way to make that happen.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Does my hon. Friend agree that the re-establishment of the Executive will require community-wide support from all sections of Northern Ireland society? To that end, does he welcome last week's ecumenical initiative from the Churches in Northern Ireland, which, I understand, met representatives of the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Fein? May I ask the Government to continue to encourage and to support all such genuine community initiatives to find a way forward in the peace process?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is right. At the end of the day, the understanding that is needed will happen because of cross-community confidence-building measures. We will, ultimately, get a solution through politics. At the same time, however, any pressure, help or new incentives that can be applied in the situation by Churches and other groups in the community are always to be welcomed. I believe that it is very important that the whole society of Northern Ireland make it clear, by whatever means are available to them, that they want to move forwards, not backwards.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will Ministers be convening formal round table negotiations with the

political parties in Northern Ireland before the end of April? In that context, how significant does the hon. Gentleman feel that the 22 May deadline is?

Mr. Howarth: We are using a variety of meeting formats, including round table discussions. There has already been one round table meeting of all the pro-agreement parties, to talk about how we can move forward. We certainly would not rule out using that medium again. However, other ways need to be explored—including bilateral discussions between us and the Government of the Republic of Ireland, and meetings with individual political parties. All those methods have been employed in recent weeks, and we shall continue to employ them as and when it is appropriate to do so. Of course 22 May is still a significant deadline, as it had certain actions attached to it.

As I said a few moments ago, however, it is important that we get some sort of agreement that recognises that all the issues that come under the heading of the Good Friday agreement can be resolved. At this stage, I want to use dates not as barriers, but as targets. If we can have that type of understanding, it is possible that we can get people together and understand what is necessary to get this whole process back on track.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Does the Minister accept that no institution of Government properly described as democratic can include the political representatives of an armed terrorist group that is determined to remain armed? Does he accept that there is absolutely no evidence of any type that the IRA has shown any intention whatever of disarming?

Mr. Howarth: It is very kind of the hon. and learned Gentleman to strike a constructive note in these discussions. As I said a few moments ago, if we want politics to work, private armies have to be removed from the equation. Our objective is to bring not only the IRA but other paramilitary groups who profess support for the Good Friday agreement to a point of understanding, so that guns, bombs and violence are taken out of the equation for the future. If we can achieve that—replacing what has gone before with proper politics and with devolution, whereby local people make local decisions about local services—it has to be progress. That is what we want to achieve. I hope that all people of good will—politicians and others—in Northern Ireland will come to see that that is the only way forward.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Will the Minister straightforwardly confirm that it is incompatible with our parliamentary democracy for those who are inextricably linked to paramilitaries who have singularly failed to decommission any illegally held arms or explosives to be Ministers in the Executive?

Mr. Howarth: Over the coming weeks—if it takes longer, it will take longer—we seek to achieve a situation in which those who are linked to paramilitaries make it absolutely clear and beyond doubt that that phase is over and that they are irreversibly in the phase of politics. The issue that therefore arises is whether, in the next few weeks, we can get a process going whereby everyone—including those who are in the Unionist party, who have to make very difficult decisions—is absolutely clear that we are in a phase of politics, not a phase of terrorism. I hope that we can achieve that. If there is anything that I or the right hon. Gentleman can do, we should set out on that path.

Mr. MacKay: It appears that Government policy is moving. Will the Minister explain the fact that the Secretary of State said on 11 February when suspending the Executive:

> The blunt truth is that unless the issue of decommissioning is resolved, the Executive institutions cannot properly function whether formally suspended or not?

Yet last Saturday, at the Alliance conference, he said:

> I believe that we must think twice before linking decommissioning directly to the continuation of these institutions.

It does not help the process if there is conflicting information in speeches by the Secretary of State. Will the Minister be good enough to clarify the position?

Mr. Howarth: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman should heed the words of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), leader of the Ulster Unionists, who has made it clear that the Ulster Unionists need to feel confident that the decommissioning issue will be dealt with once and for all, that the threat will be gone and the weapons will be put beyond use. We and our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland are working towards that. It is what the right hon. Member for Upper Bann will need to persuade his colleagues back into the process of devolution, with an Executive running services that are directly relevant to Northern Ireland. I have explained the position and what we will work towards achieving.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Let us hope for the early re-establishment of the Assembly and the Executive. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Secretary of State, in his talks with representatives of the political parties, is actively engaging with the likes of Monica McWilliams, David Ervine, Gary McMichael and others who, in their different ways, have an important part to play in the peace process and the re-institution of the Executive and the Assembly?

Mr. Howarth: I can confirm that. Indeed, I have attended many meetings where all the parties, including the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and other parties whose representatives were mentioned by my hon. Friend, were included in the process. We recognise entirely that it is not just the big parties, important though they are, that are part of the process; the small parties also signed up to the Good Friday agreement. We have every reason to include them and we shall continue to do so.

Security

3. **Mr. Patrick Nicholls** (Teignbridge): If he will make a statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland. [117373]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): There remains a continuing potent and dangerous threat from dissident paramilitaries. There has also been a recent increase in the so-called

punishment beatings, which we unreservedly condemn. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State continues to keep the security situation under close review.

Mr. Nicholls: On this most remarkable day, with the presentation of the George Cross to the RUC, Ministers are clearly speaking for us all when they pay tribute to the matchless courage of the RUC. The Roman Catholics who have been brave enough to serve in the RUC also deserve a mention, bearing in mind that the Irish Republican Army made it clear that it would kill them for doing so, if it could. Does the Minister understand that if the badges, emblems and tradition of the RUC are to be cast aside to appease those who spend their lives trying to destroy the RUC, that will amount not to a celebration of the courage of the RUC, but to its betrayal?

Mr. Ingram: Of course today is a very auspicious day, with the award of the George Cross to the RUC. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State referred to that and the whole House endorsed what he said. In terms of the way forward in respect of the future policing of Northern Ireland, I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman could lif his eyes slightly higher and look at the new horizon, which is an inclusive approach to Northern Ireland that involves everyone in taking forward a new normalised society. That was implicit in the Good Friday agreement and was presaged in the Patten report. We will present our views on how to proceed with that in legislation in due course.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): Does my right hon. Friend believe that the central point for future security in Northern Ireland is decommissioning and that, if paramilitary groups ensured that there was a noticeable reduction in or an end to punishment beatings, that would be a positive move towards decommissioning and could form part of the Government's discussions on the issue?

Mr. Ingram: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which was addressed on earlier questions by my ministerial colleague, who made it very clear that if politics is to work, private armies must be removed from the equation. Decommissioning is most likely to happen in the context of implementation of the whole agreement, including the restoration of the institutions, which in turn is most likely to happen if there is genuine confidence on everyone's part that decommissioning will happen in good time and the threat that weapons pose is removed for good.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): On this special day in Northern Ireland, we welcome the visit of Her Majesty the Queen. We are especially delighted at the well-deserved award of the George Cross to the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Does the Minister recall that, when we signed up to the Belfast agreement, the Government agreed in article 1 on page 28 that they would give full respect for the

identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities..?

Is he aware of the public opinion poll conducted last week by McCann Erickson—a well-known public relations firm in Northern Ireland—and printed in the *Belfast Telegraph*, which confirms that 93 per cent. of the Protestants in Northern Ireland and 61 per cent. of the Roman Catholics are not offended by the name "Royal Ulster Constabulary"? Why do the Government propose to breach the Belfast agreement?

Mr. Ingram: I do not think that we are breaching it. We are involved in discussions through which we hope to move forward in a more progressive way over the coming weeks, or a longer period, if that is required.

The survey to which the right hon. Gentleman referred contained other statistics and showed that a sizeable proportion of the minority community found the RUC offensive. We have to take that into account. We can argue against it all we want and we can uphold and defend the good name of the RUC, which I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State do on many, many occasions, but we have to take account of the need to create an inclusive society. That is what the Belfast agreement set out to achieve, and that is what we are seeking to implement in full.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): Is the Minister aware of the controversy surrounding the action of an IRA prisoner who is suing the Government for £50,000 following a botched attempt to escape? Will he instruct his Department to stop settling claims from prisoners out of court and to ensure that any money received by prisoners is clawed back to make up for the amount spent by the Government in compensation?

Mr. Ingram: It would be inappropriate for me to discuss any individual case that is currently before a court of law. Compensation claims are settled following a practice that has been adopted over a number of years: there is no new development. Claims are always settled on the basis of the best legal advice available on the nature and extent of the claim. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that. If he returns as a Minister in the restored Assembly, he may have to make some difficult decisions himself. I look forward to his having that opportunity.

Fuel Tax

4. **Mr. Eddie McGrady** (South Down): What recent discussions he has had with the petrol retail industry in Northern Ireland concerning the level of tax on fuel; and if he will make a statement. [117374]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Ministers and officials have maintained close contact with industry representatives and are fully aware of the impact of excise duties on Northern Ireland petrol retailers. In his recent Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that apart from the automatic inflation rise of 2p per litre there will be no real terms increase in road fuel duties. Officials are in touch with Treasury colleagues to explore possible ways of ameliorating the situation.

Mr. McGrady: I thank the Minister for that reply. I am sure that he agreed with his ministerial colleague who criticised Barclays bank for destroying the commercial heart of towns and villages, but that is what the fuel duty is doing to the rural communities of Northern Ireland. Would he again consider the scheme that was initiated by the Dutch and German Governments to

address their border problems caused by differentials in excise duties and levies? Will he at least introduce a de minimis scheme to alleviate the problem, which benefits only the racketeers, the smugglers and the paramilitaries and denies livelihoods to local people?

Mr. Ingram: The Government do not minimise the impact of the issue on border communities. The scheme that was due to be applied on the Dutch-German border by the Dutch authorities was found to be inappropriate in terms of EU regulations. We considered it as a possibility for Northern Ireland, but if it is not deemed to be appropriate for the Dutch it would also be inappropriate for us to proceed with a similar scheme. I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to consider how we can develop schemes that will tackle that difficult issue.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [117445] **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 April.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in sending our most profound condolences to the family of Bernie Grant, who died at the weekend. He was a dedicated constituency Member who worked tirelessly for the cause of social justice. He was an inspiration and an example to black people and others throughout the country. He will be deeply missed.

Ms Keeble: I also send my best wishes to Bernie Grant's family. He helped me some years ago when I was a council leader and I had huge admiration for him. He will be deeply missed.

Is my right hon. Friend aware that Labour-controlled Northamptonshire county council has today announced a £4.4 million cash windfall, as a result of the recent Budget, to pay for 5,400 extra child care places, and an £8 million cash windfall to do up the county's schools? That is in a year when we do not even have council elections. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that shows that Labour is delivering on the big issues that affect the lives of my constituents, while the Tory Opposition can only sit on the political sidelines and brand those spending plans as reckless?

The Prime Minister: About a half of schools will get new buildings and facilities as a result of the new deal for schools, which is opposed by the Conservatives. I am delighted to say that the extra £1 billion of Budget spending for education will mean that in the three years between 1998-99 and 2001-02 there will be an average real-terms increase of some £300 per pupil. That increase of £300 per pupil compares with the reduction of £50 per pupil in the three years of the last three Budgets of the Conservative Government. That is the reason why people should choose a Labour Government who care about education over a Conservative Government who undermined it.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): May I associate this side of the House with the Prime Minister's remarks about Bernie Grant, and join him in sending our deepest condolences to Bernie Grant's family?

On a different subject, does the Prime Minister recognise that what has brought thousands of sub-postmasters here today, with a petition with 3 million signatures, is the fact that the Government are presiding over a record number of closures and a threat to thousands more post offices? Will he now listen to the wholly reasonable campaign for people to be able to receive benefits and pensions in cash at post offices without the compulsory use of bank accounts and introduce a proper swipecard system, as we planned, so that the future of post offices can be secured, not destroyed?

The Prime Minister: The first thing that should be pointed out is that the Conservative Government closed 3,000 post offices and planned to privatise the Post Office. The Conservative party still plans to privatise it. Of course we all want to see post offices thrive, but we must ensure that that is done against the background of necessary modernisation. More people will want to draw their pensions, child benefits and other benefits via their bank accounts. However, let me make one thing absolutely clear, again: no one will be prevented from continuing to receive benefits in cash at the post office if he or she wants to, and not only monthly but weekly. We will work with the post offices to give them a viable future, but like every other institution—they recognise this—they will have to face the challenges of modernisation.

Mr. Hague: Everybody involved in the lobby down the Committee Corridor knows that those are meaningless reassurances. They know also that the number of post office closures in the last year of the previous Government was 116, but that in the last year under the right hon. Gentleman's Government there will be 500 closures. We had a policy to save post offices; the right hon. Gentleman has a policy to close post offices. Is it not sickeningly hypocritical of the Government to launch hopeless boycotts of banks while swinging the axe on thousands of small businesses? Is it not undeniable that a system such as the Conservative Government proposed to introduce would have saved hundreds or thousands of post offices, which now are being condemned to closure?

The Prime Minister: No. Of course, the last Government did not actually introduce the new system, and I shall explain why. When we came to office, there was probably no greater shambles than the Horizon project. It was three years behind schedule. It would have cost hundreds of millions of pounds more than the present system. It is a cruel deception to pretend that that project would have provided an answer. The system that we are suggesting will still allow people, if they want to, to get their pensions or their child benefit in cash, while recognising that more and more people will want them paid through their bank accounts.

We must now work out with the post offices and others how they can have a viable future. That is exactly what we are trying to do. The 3,000 figure for closures that I gave the House is correct. However, let me give the average for Wales when the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State for Wales—it quadrupled in the years 1992–97 and averaged 90 a year.

Mr. Hague: Give the answer now—if the project was such a shambles, why did the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), the then Secretary of State, say 18 months after the Government came to power that the project was important? He added:

> I feel confident that the project will be properly completed.

Now we know that those assurances meant nothing. It was not the project that failed, it was Ministers who failed. The problem was not smart cards, it was stupid government.

The right hon. Gentleman says that people can still collect their pensions or benefits in cash, but who will bear the transaction cost of the collection of benefit from a post office when it goes via a clearing bank? How can people collect their benefits in cash if the sub-post office has already been forced to close? Asked these things, the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, said that the Government

> do not have answers to all the questions—[*Official Report*, 29 March 2000; Vol. 347, c. 451.]

The Minister is obviously an understudy for the Prime Minister. Will the right hon. Gentleman now change his policy and complete the project that we planned, to save the post offices before it is too late?

The Prime Minister: Again, I stress that if the right hon. Gentleman is saying that he would reintroduce the benefit payment card system, that is a commitment of hundreds of millions of pounds, without the slightest prospect of that project being able to do what the previous Government said it could do. No doubt that is why they did not introduce it. The information technology platform is important, which is why we are introducing it into post offices.

We are also sitting down with the Post Office to see how many post offices can provide some of the banking services. Barclays has already agreed to take part, and 3,000 post offices—*[Interruption.]* It is surely sensible to take these steps. Three thousand post offices are to have cashpoint services, but we must face the hard realities. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman says that we have to make welfare savings. This system will allow us to make welfare savings of £600 million a year—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House is having its fun, but it will come to order now.

The Prime Minister: At least we know that the Conservative party would refuse that offer. It would turn it down and not allow new services to be provided by the Post Office. What a ridiculous position to be in.

More and more people—

Hon. Members: More, more.

Madam Speaker: Order. One or two people will be leaving the Chamber in a moment—and, Mr. King, you might be one of them.

The Prime Minister: Half a million more people each year choose to get their pension or child benefit through their bank accounts. That will carry on, so inevitably the post offices are faced with a process of change. The question is how to deal with it. The best way is make sure that people can still get their benefits in cash, if they want to do so, but that we work with the post offices to provide a new range of services for the future. That is better than proceeding with the policies of the previous Government, who did not introduce their benefit payment card, which would have cost hundreds of millions of pounds. Their actions had already resulted in the closure of 3,000 post offices. That is not a sensible policy for the future.

Q2. [117446] **Mrs. Rosemary McKenna** (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): May I draw the attention of my right hon. Friend to a matter that is of great concern in Scotland, especially in the central belt? He will be aware of the world-renowned quality of shipbuilding on the Clyde. Does he share my concern at the speculation that the Ministry of Defence order for roll on/roll off ferries could go overseas? That could have damaging consequences for the long-term future of shipbuilding on the Clyde.

The Prime Minister: I am fully aware of the uncertainty over the order, but I stress to my hon. Friend that no decision has been taken—contrary to some of the speculation in the media.

I stress also that United Kingdom warship orders are coming up, and Scotland can be expected to benefit. For example, it is most probable that the type 45 destroyer first of class will be assembled and launched on the Clyde. That is a different order altogether, but I stress that a decision has not yet been taken. However, I also emphasise that the Government recently spent about £500 million on defence equipment from contractors based in Scotland. Orders are coming, but it is important that we take decisions not only on the best commercial grounds but in the best interests of our shipbuilding industry.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): May I associate my hon. and right hon. Friends, especially those who represent London constituencies, with the tributes that have been paid to the late Bernie Grant?

To return to the issue of post offices, will the Prime Minister acknowledge that the previous Conservative Government had a plan to save them? I am sure that King Herod had a similar plan to save the first born. The Prime Minister is right to condemn the 3,000 post office closures that took place under the Tories, but will he not at least express regret at the 500 closures that have taken place under Labour?

The Prime Minister: Of course, but we must try to provide post offices with the best guarantee of a good

future. No one can stand here and guarantee that no post office will ever close. I said that half a million more people each year now decide to get their benefits paid through their bank accounts. We cannot stop them. If more and more people want to do that, there will inevitably be a challenge for the post offices.

We are very happy to sit down with the sub-postmasters and post mistresses and work out the right way forward. However, it has to be done on the basis that we recognise the modern realities, and there has to be a limit to Government subsidy.

Mr. Kennedy: Given that the Government are proposing to transfer benefit payments and pensions away from the post offices to the banks—and I am not sure that hitching their wagon to Barclays is sensible at the moment—will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government have projected that savings of £640 million will accrue over the next five years? If the House is serious about the future of rural post offices, would it not make sense to reinvest those savings in the network so that it has a viable future?

Finally, will the Prime Minister confirm that, when in opposition, the hon. Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo), who is now Paymaster General, wrote in a letter that the Tories' plans were totally unacceptable to the Labour party because they targeted

those members of our society who are least well off, such as those on benefits and pensions...?

If that was the case then, why is it not the case now?

The Prime Minister: The Conservative policy was then, and is now, to privatise the Post Office. The privatisation of the Post Office would lead to the closure of rural post offices. We have to balance two different things. The first is obviously to make sure that if people so wish, they can get their benefits paid through their bank accounts, and the second is that if they still want to receive them in cash, they should be able to do so. We have given an absolute commitment, which I have repeated again today, and, what is more, they can collect them weekly as well as monthly. We must work out the best way to do that.

The new system will not be introduced for two years and then there will be a transitional period of two years. We have time to work out the right future for the Post Office, but it must be done on a basis that is sustainable for the future.

As for welfare savings, I accept that the Liberal Democrats always want more money to be spent—that is part and parcel of what they are about—but for the Conservatives to go around the country saying that they will fund tax cuts through welfare savings and then to oppose every single aspect of those savings is absurd. The £140 million that it is estimated will be saved as a result of reductions in fraud is also important.

I make no apologies for the policy—it is right. We now have to work out how we deal with the consequences of the fact that more and more people over time will get their benefits paid through their bank accounts. We have offered a proper partnership to the post offices, which is surely better than giving a guarantee, which could not be sustained, that no post office will ever close. It is surely better than the Tory plan which is, I repeat, to privatise the Post Office.

Q4. [117448] **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the very welcome new deal for communities programme, operating in Liverpool and elsewhere, and boosted by today's announcement, will be fully effective only if we continue to have a successful economy? Does he accept that the triumph of the new deal programme generally is a vindication of the importance of redistribution and intervention in our economy, and please can we have more of both?

The Prime Minister: Of course, as a result of the partnerships that have been announced today a considerable sum of money will be available. Indeed, £31 million will go to an area in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Overall, to tackle the problems—particularly of inner-city deprivation—the Government introduced the new deal, which is cutting unemployment. Some 800,000 new jobs have been created. Also, 1 million people are benefiting from the minimum wage and the working families tax credit benefits 1.25 million families—while free eye tests, the new winter fuel allowance and the new minimum income guarantee all help pensioners. Those policies show that it is part of the Government's essential mission to tackle poverty in this country.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): When I asked the Prime Minister some time ago what the effect would be on Britain's emissions of the moratorium on gas-fired power stations, he did not know. His right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions thought that the effect would be so small as to be laughable. It turns out that the effect is, in fact, so large that it countervails the whole effect of the climate change levy. Did the Prime Minister not answer me because it was embarrassing, or did he not know because the Government had not worked out the figures? If he disagrees with my facts, he may wish to know that they were contained in an answer given to the House last month.

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman is speaking on behalf of the Conservative party, I hope that people in the coal industry will realise what it means for them. We are on course to hit the entirety of our Kyoto targets on CO_2 emissions. The Government have taken the lead on that, and our commitments will be met—and met in full. That is the best answer that I can give to the right hon. Gentleman.

Q5. [117449] **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): Does the Prime Minister welcome the most important recommendation made by the Chairman of the Select Committee on Liaison in its report "Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive", which, if implemented, would mean that the Government would never again choose who should be charged with scrutinising them and holding them to account through the Select Committee system? That would be a welcome and universally acclaimed constitutional change. Will my right hon. Friend use his authority to ensure an early vote on the matter, which should, by convention, be a free vote

as it is a House of Commons matter? That would allow us to put the proposal in place before the general election and to say goodbye to the parliamentary choreographers on both the Government and the Opposition Front Benches who choose who shall serve on Select Committees.

The Prime Minister: I do not think that anyone has ever accused my hon. Friend of being choreographed by anybody. I have been given some rather wise advise from my right-hand side, which is that our response will be made in due course.

Q6. [117450] **Mr. Alex Salmond** (Banff and Buchan): Does the Prime Minister accept that sterling's appreciation by 40 per cent. against the deutschmark over the past four years has made life extremely difficult for those who produce and export everything from cars in the midlands to ships on the Clyde? Has he read the comments attributed to the Secretary of State for Defence in today's Scottish press, to the effect that metal bashing is no longer a vital national asset? Will he take this opportunity to distance the Government from that attitude and to show that he recognises that shipbuilding is a high-technology, not a low-technology industry? Will he indicate that he understands the vital contribution of the Govan yard and offer his personal involvement in securing its future?

The Prime Minister: First, the comments attributed to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence are absolute nonsense. Secondly, I have already answered my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mrs. McKenna) on the order referred to by the hon. Gentleman. However, I must add that the SNP is the one group of people with absolutely no right to raise the issue. There are 20,000 Ministry of Defence personnel in Scotland, and £500 million a year is spent on defence equipment orders. The SNP wants British armed forces out of Scotland. The SNP's separatism plans would close Govan, Faslane, Coulport, Yarrow and RAF Lossiemouth and lose 20,000 MOD personnel. When it comes to a choice between the SNP and Labour on defence and its contracts, people are better off with us.

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): The whole of Scotland will welcome the Prime Minister's assurance that there is everything to play for over the contract for six roll on/roll off ferries. Will he guarantee that the competition for the contract will be held on a level playing field? Will it be taken into account that foreign competitors are reportedly moving cheap labour from eastern and central Europe into their shipyards? People are living in containers on the docksides and in the shipyards, and that sort of competition is wholly unfair.

Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that tens of thousands of jobs in Scotland depend on Ministry of Defence procurement spending, each and every one of which would be in danger of being sunk by the flagship policy of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), which would make England a foreign country and break up this small island?

The Prime Minister: On my hon. Friend's first point, yes of course there is everything to play for, and of course it is important that there be a level playing field. With procurement contracts, as they are not defence contracts as such, we are bound by the procurement contract rules of the European Union in the same way as every other country. I can tell my hon. Friend that we shall scrutinise carefully any bids to make sure that they fall in line with those rules. As for what my hon. Friend was saying about the policy of the SNP, I wholeheartedly concur.

Mr. Hague: The whole House will want to join in congratulating the Royal Ulster Constabulary on the richly deserved award of the George Cross by Her Majesty the Queen today. I know that the Prime Minister will agree that it is a fitting tribute to its service and sacrifice, with 300 officers murdered and 10,000 injured over the past 30 years.

Does the Prime Minister also accept that many people will find it difficult to understand how the proposal to strip the RUC of its title sits easily with that wholly justified award today? Will he at least think again about that and agree that it would be a mistake to introduce any of the security-sensitive measures in the Patten report before there is lasting peace and decommissioning?

The Prime Minister: The award is absolutely vital for the RUC and totally deserved in view of what has happened during the past 30 years. It is vital that its officers' service be recognised throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. Many died during that period and many others have suffered loss of limbs. Their families have often lived in the most appalling fear and terror. I am delighted and honoured to pay my tribute to the RUC for all the work that it has done.

The Patten report made a series of recommendations about the RUC name. We believe that that report, with the amendments that the Secretary of State has already discussed, is the right way forward. Although we listen to the concerns that people have, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman agrees that it is essential in future that Northern Ireland should have a police force and a police service that can attract recruits from all sides of the community. That is all that the Patten recommendations are designed to achieve.

Mr. Hague: Of course we agree with the objective that the Prime Minister has expressed, but does he acknowledge that the capability and capacity of the main terrorist organisations remain, in the words of the Chief Constable, "undiminished", and that, as events last week confirmed, the threat from dissident groups continues? Will the right hon. Gentleman guarantee that there can be no question of introducing measures such as large cuts in the manpower of the RUC, or allowing Sinn Fein on to policing boards, while the IRA hangs on to its guns and bombs?

The Prime Minister: We will take no risks whatever with security in Northern Ireland; of course not. The number of people in the RUC is dependent on the security situation, but the actions of a small group of dissidents should not hold up progress towards a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland. Irrespective of the actions of those dissidents, it is surely important that we try to

implement proposals that are designed to give us a police service and a police force in Northern Ireland that can attract people from all the different parts of the community.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that that is the right objective. After all, the Patten report was drawn up by Chris Patten, a former Northern Ireland Office Minister in the Conservative Government, and the committee that drew up the recommendations was made up of a very balanced group of people. It would be unfortunate if the right hon. Gentleman and his party now decided to disagree with those recommendations.

Q7. [117451] **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): By the time of the next general election, will hunting with dogs be banned, as most people believed that Labour had promised to do at the last general election?

The Prime Minister: As I said, Lord Burns will publish his report in due course. The Government will then state their position and the House will have an opportunity to vote. Let us be quite clear that the views of the House are already well known—and so are mine.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge the enormous contribution made by public libraries over the past 150 years towards enhancing the lives of British people? Does he recognise the continuing importance of public libraries to the knowledge economy and the information society?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. What is more, as a result of lottery money that is being used for libraries, we are making sure that everyone in the country has an opportunity for education. The proportion of national income spent on education having fallen in the last few years of the previous, Conservative Government, it is now rising again under the Labour Government. The investment in schools and hospitals is one very good reason for people to come out and vote Labour on 4 May.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. At about 2.50 pm today, I tried to gain access to the House through the St. Stephen's entrance. Because of the large number of representatives of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses complaining about the change of policy on the payment of social benefits, it took me and my two guests more than five minutes to gain access. The Metropolitan police had lost complete control over access to the House. Will you make representations to the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, Madam Speaker, to ensure that Members of Parliament can gain ready and immediate access to the House whenever necessary?

Madam Speaker: I shall certainly draw the comments made by the hon. Gentleman and the delay that he experienced in gaining access to the House to the attention of the Serjeant-at-Arms and seek a report from him.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. On 13 April, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), speaking as a Minister, made a statement commenting on—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. To which year is the right hon. Gentleman referring?

Mr. Jack: This year, Madam Speaker—*[Interruption.]* I apologise, Madam Speaker; it was last year.

Madam Speaker: I should like to know the year because my memory is not all that good.

Mr. Jack: Clearly, there may be deficiencies in mine, Madam Speaker.

At column 13 of *Hansard*, on 13 April 1999, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate, speaking as a Minister, commented on remarks made by the Opposition. She said that our policies would have caused a third of the London underground to be closed down. While she was still in office, I pursued the reasons behind that statement through correspondence with her Department.

I received no reply, but continued to pursue the matter by correspondence. Yesterday, I received a reply from the office of the current Minister, signed by a private secretary. The substance of that letter was that, because the item that I queried had come from a Labour party briefing, it was not possible for the Department to comment on it, and that the matter was being referred back to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate for her personal comment.

I had thought that when Ministers spoke from the Dispatch Box, they spoke on behalf of the Government, and that they should be able to justify their statements. Is it in order for such business to be sub-contracted back for answer from a Back-Bench Member?

Madam Speaker: The matter that the right hon. Gentleman raises is certainly a matter for argument; however, it is a matter for the Government and I hope that he will pursue it with them.

Registered Fair Rents

3.34 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Rent Act 1977 to limit the maximum fair rent registrable in respect of regulated tenancies.

The Bill is a technical measure to restore the position of protected tenants to what it was before the 15 February Court of Appeal judgment that the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999 was made beyond the powers of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985.

Most private tenancies entered into before January 1989 are regulated under the Rent Act 1977. Tenants have long-term security of tenure and both landlord and tenant have the right to have a fair rent determined by an independent rent officer. Both have the right to appeal to a rent assessment committee if they are not satisfied with the rent officer's decision. Rents are set every two years and become effective two years from the previous registration, or on the day of the rent assessment hearing.

Fair rents, as laid down by the 1977 Act, are decided by, first, the age, character, locality and state of repair of the building, and, secondly, the rent that could be achieved in the open market if the supply and demand for accommodation are balanced, which is usually referred to as "scarcity". Therefore, until 1988, fair rents were decided by comparisons with previous fair-rent decisions based on those two factors.

The system did not seem to be unfair to landlords, who continued to buy property in which protected tenants lived. They were able to buy property cheaply because the protected tenants were there. They received a reasonable, secure and unfailing return on the money that they had invested, and they were certain of capital gains when the tenant died or moved on.

The Housing Act 1988 had two main effects: it introduced assured and shorthold assured tenancies at open market rents, so now comparable market rents were available; and it prevented the emergence of future generations of regulated tenants by allowing tenancies to be inherited by spouses only. As a result of the latter effect, those affected by the Court of Appeal judgment are mainly pensioners or coming up to pension age.

Since the 1988 Act came into force, a number of developments—some of which were consequential on the Act—have had the effect of raising rents. The sale of council houses sanctioned by the 1988 Act added to the shortage of homes available at lower rents, and increased prices generally. The increased use of the rent assessment committee by landlords resulted in rent rises in 80 per cent. of cases heard, and in half of all cases the rent was increased by an average of 18 per cent.

In 1997, the case of London Rate Assessment Panel *v.* Curtis determined that market rent comparables should be used in all cases. That placed tenants at a disadvantage in obtaining reliable information on market rents actually paid, as opposed to those asked for. Landlords, on the other hand, usually have their own properties with which to compare, and were placed in a more powerful position.

A Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions consultation paper, published in 1998 and sent to tenants and landlords, offered tenants some hope. Its tone was sympathetic to statutory tenants and it suggested that

rent increases should be capped at 10 per cent. plus inflation. Following representations by tenants, that was altered to 7.5 per cent. plus inflation, and the Government drafted a statutory instrument known as the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order.

What is galling for the statutory tenants, given that the judgment appears to result from a legal technicality, is the fact that the order was delayed because it had to be checked by the lawyers of the Law Officers' Department, but, on 11 January 1999, the statutory instrument became the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999. It came into force on 1 February.

Spath Holme Limited, a Manchester-based landlord, took the matter to judicial review and the Court of Appeal found that the order was ultra vires vis-á-vis the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985.

It is important for the House to realise that the Court of Appeal did not rule on the principle of capping regulated fair rent increases, or on the level of the limits set in the order; it ruled merely that it was outside the powers conferred on Ministers by the parent legislation to set limits by regulations.

As a result of that judgment, thousands of tenants now face the prospect of rent increases similar to those that were common before the order came into force. This morning, I met a tenant of Lamont Properties, whose rent has increased from £135 to £255 a week; another tenant, of Clapham Properties, whose rent has increased from £4,000 a year to £9,000 a year; and a tenant of the Wellcome Trust, supposedly a charity, whose rent has increased from £3,100 to £8,500 since the Court of Appeal judgment.

The situation for tenants is actually more difficult than it was before the order was introduced. Through no fault of their own, they have been made responsible for the difference between the capped rent and the uncapped rent, backdated for at least 28 days. DETR issued guidance to the Rent Service Agency to advise landlords that, if the difference between the capped and uncapped rent is large, it will be open to them to seek a county court order to obtain arrears for up to six months. Bearing in mind the fact that most statutory tenants are pensioners, not only will they have to pay retrospective arrears, but they may be forced to appear in the county court—an indignity that will horrify them and that they have done nothing to deserve.

Although initially refused leave by the Court of Appeal, the Government have indicated that they will petition the House of Lords to appeal. Although the ruling raises an important constitutional principle about the scope of ministerial discretion, it could be several months before an appeal is heard and there is no guarantee that it will be successful.

I present my Bill in the hope that the Government will consider another way to restore the limits on registered fair rent increases and to prevent vulnerable tenants from receiving unaffordable rent increases that may force many of them from their homes. Emergency legislation is required and there is not a day to lose.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Adrian Sanders, Ms Karen Buck, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. Michael Portillo, Mr. Paul Burstow, Mr. Tom Brake, Mr. Andrew Love, Dr. Jenny Tonge and Dr. Vincent Cable.

Registered Fair Rents

Mr. Adrian Sanders accordingly presented a Bill to amend the Rent Act 1977 to limit the maximum fair rent registrable in respect of regulated tenancies: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 14 April, and to be printed [Bill 111].

Opposition Day

[9TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Sub-post Offices

Madam Speaker: We come now to the motion on the future of sub-post offices. I have selected the amendment that stands in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.42 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the Government's failure to provide a coherent strategy for the future of sub-post offices; expresses concern that nearly a year has elapsed without any solutions to the problems created by the arbitrary announcement to withdraw income from community post offices in return for the payment of benefits; believes that the acceleration of post office closures in 1999–2000 will continue as a result of the Government's policies; applauds the determination of the last Conservative Government to maintain a national network of post offices; supports the computerisation project started by the last Conservative Government to tackle fraud and improve technology available in post offices without cutting their income; calls upon the Government to recognise the social value of post offices to local communities; and now requires the Government, as a matter of urgency, to identify new income streams for sub-post offices in the future and to end the confusion for benefits recipients about the future payment arrangements at local level.

Today, 2,000 sub-postmasters are in London because they fear for the future of their businesses. Nearly a year has elapsed since the Secretary of State announced Labour's Treasury-driven decision to switch the payment of benefits and pensions from post offices to automated credit transfer. Since that announcement was made, there have been many debates in the House; indeed, this is the second Opposition day debate that the Conservative party has introduced.

In the past year, there has been an acceleration of post office closures—double the number the previous year. Post offices are being advised by their banks not to extend their borrowing and we know that the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters fears for the future of 8,000 sub-post offices, which are privately owned businesses at the heart of both rural and urban communities. Indeed, it was shocking to hear at Prime Minister's questions this afternoon that the Prime Minister still seems to believe that Britain's network of sub-post offices is part of a nationalised industry and that it is not made of private businesses that invest their own capital and need to prepare their own business plans for the future.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): My hon. Friend has touched on one of the most important aspects of this issue. Six post office closures in my constituency have already been announced this year. Four were very much part-time post offices and two were small village shops with a post office. Does she not agree that we are seeing a process that cuts at the bone of the rural network of small businesses that support small village and rural communities?

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The network is made up of businesses that provide a range of services and they often combine the post office with the village shop. Like everyone else, sub-postmasters have to make business decisions and plan for the future. In the uncertain world that the Government have created, many choose to get out altogether rather than sell their businesses on. That is an indictment not only of the Government's arbitrary decisions a year ago, but of the way in which they have subsequently handled matters.

I want to place Conservative achievements on record. When we were faced with a choice between more savings for the Treasury and ensuring the survival of the post office network, the previous Conservative Government, by contrast with Labour, opted for the more expensive benefit card project to ensure the survival of the sub-post office network for rural and urban communities.

As the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters said in its submission to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry:

the decision of the previous Government to automate the delivery of benefits payments using the benefits payment card was based on the need to reduce costs, eliminate fraud and ensure beneficiaries would be able to continue to receive their payment in cash from the post office, thus ensuring they retained a choice as to the method of payment which best suited their individual circumstance . . .

The submission continued:

this was recognised to be the only way to ensure the future survival and prosperity of the post office network.

Earlier today, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) introduced a debate on sub-post offices in Westminster Hall. It is not the first time that he has spoken on this subject in the past year. The fact that he puts on record the background to the way in which the Conservative party introduced the switch from the book to the payment card, and the proposals that this Government inherited, clearly identifies the previous Government's priorities.

My right hon. Friend speaks with the authority of someone who has been Secretary of State in the two key Departments—the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Social Security. He said:

When I moved to the Department of Social Security, my interest deepened further, as I saw how essential the network was to the effective delivery of benefits to many of the most vulnerable people in our communities. I helped to ensure that that delivery mechanism and the network would continue by agreeing to the horizon project, about which the Government are now trying to rewrite history . . .—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 52WH.]

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The hon. Lady will recall that, in the last Parliament, I praised the approach of the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) to merging benefits and taxation issues. However, I am not sure that I could praise his handling of the original Horizon project. I have followed its progress from the beginning. Will the hon. Lady put on record the fact that it is Conservative policy to reintroduce the previous plan, exactly as it was, for the system? We will then know precisely what the debate is about.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman knows what the Government inherited, and what they did with that inheritance. The Conservative party will consider what we inherit and what we can salvage from the damage and the mess that the Government are creating.

In the past year, we have asked many questions to which we have received few answers. Even today, the Prime Minister failed to answer questions in terms that

could provide comfort to the 2,000 sub-postmasters who have given up a day's work to persuade the Government to think again and identify new streams of income to replace the income that has been lost through the Government's policies. We have debated the matter often in the past, but the Government do not intend to listen. I want to focus on the future, because today's debate is about that. That is why sub-postmasters are here today.

Sub-post offices are businesses and, like any other small business, they need to plan for the future. When the Prime Minister received the sub-postmasters at No. 10 this morning, he pointed out that the Government still have many issues to sort out between now and 2005. However, businesses do not have the luxury of time: sub-postmasters have to make business decisions today, and their bank managers are advising them today. What a luxury it is for a Government to think that such considerations can all be kicked into the long grass while they set up another focus group or advisory committee. We know that in the meantime sub-postmasters are going to the wall.

The Government should be focusing on possible extra streams of income for sub-post offices and prioritising those Government services that might be such a source of income in future. However, as we heard again from the Prime Minister this afternoon, this is all about saving money from the Department of Social Security budget, which is a failure if ever there was one, because the Government have not fulfilled the pledge to cut that budget which they made when they came to office.

The DSS and the DTI are packed with former Treasury Ministers who have rolled over and allowed the Treasury to recoup that £400 million, taking it out of the pockets of sub-postmasters, yet Ministers need four years to think up ideas that will enable post offices to plan for the future. In this matter, as in so many others, the DTI ministerial team do not understand how businesses work, and despite all the wringing of hands by Labour Members, they do not care.

Since the last summer recess, I have visited dozens of sub-post offices throughout the country. Only last month, in Sadberge in the Prime Minister's constituency, I visited the small post office, which sells a few groceries and is clearly important to the local community. With the sub-postmaster and the national president of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, I posted a letter from that post office to the Prime Minister at No. 10. He did not reply, and I was rather surprised because I should have thought that even he would have time to recognise that in his constituency sub-postmasters are struggling, as they are throughout the country.

The Prime Minister's office sent my letter to the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, who I see is on the Treasury Bench this afternoon. He sent me a two-page reply in which he comes to the crunch and makes a point that may explain why the Government have been so slow in deciding how to help post offices and how they can contribute to replacing their income streams in response to the smash-and-grab raid by the Treasury. The right hon. Gentleman said:

> Therefore, sub-postmasters' remuneration is a matter between POCL—
>
> Post Office Counters Ltd.—
>
> and the post-masters themselves.

In other words, this is nothing to do with the Government, and yet they have decided to end a contract halfway through its duration and, without giving any notice, they are removing a huge chunk of post offices' income, without the slightest idea of how the loss will be made up, jeopardising post offices and accelerating their closure.

According to the federation, 8,000 small businesses are now at risk, representing about 24,000 jobs throughout the country. If 24,000 jobs were at risk in any other industry, one would expect that the Secretary of State would have set up a taskforce by now, but instead the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, writes to me saying that it is not a matter for the Government.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister's Panglossian optimism is singularly misplaced when we recall that the group managing director of banking and customer services at the Post Office, Mr. Stuart Sweetman, said that he is not at all confident that income from other sources will in any way be sufficient to make up for the Post Office's loss of income from benefits as a result of the Government's stupid policy?

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend is right, and I have visited an excellent sub-post office in his constituency.

The Government are quick to claim that they are doing something. When the Prime Minister is out and about in the country—I recall his visit to the countryside in the west country a little while back—instead of saying frankly, as we now read in missives from every Department around Whitehall, that it was not a matter for the Government, he tried to placate postmasters by saying that cash dispensers would be installed, and that the Government would sit down and talk, as he said again today. He has had a year to sit down and talk to those businesses, yet we are expected to believe that for once he will come up with something useful.

Mr. Miller *rose—*

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I have already given way to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller); I now give way to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne).

Mr. Browne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. On the contributions to the discussion from Mr. Stuart Sweetman, is she aware that Mr. Sweetman attended a meeting of the all-party group on community banking convened by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) on Monday? I hope to tell the House some of what he said, if I am called to speak. In the Committee Room, he explained in great detail the discussions with banks in which he was engaged, which could generate £200 million of income for sub-post offices—hardly a drop in the ocean.

Mrs. Browning: Of course we support any initiative. I must tell the Secretary of State that it is past five to 12, as far as sub-post offices are concerned. As they plan their

[Mrs. Browning]

business for the coming financial year and particularly for the next two or three years, sub-postmasters need to know what other sources of income will be available to them. After a year of inactivity on the Government's part, any activity is to be welcomed. The question is whether it will be enough to save the sub-post offices that are now closing at double the rate at which they closed last year.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Before she leaves the subject of the Prime Minister, did she find it instructive that in his replies earlier this afternoon, he said that there was nothing wrong with the policy—it was just the consequences? Would it not be helpful if the policy touched base with the consequences? The consequences are that there will be no post offices by the time the new technology is available.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman is right. It was also noted this afternoon that the Prime Minister made a point of saying that he made no apology. Those on the Treasury Bench are well known for making no apology when they close businesses, put people out of work and create chaos and confusion among some of the most vulnerable people in society. That is the hallmark of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet.

Let us consider alternatives to chaos—*[Interruption.]* I wrote the speech myself. Unlike the ones that come from Millbank tower, these are all home-made.

There are steps that the Government could take, and they should act quickly if they are to save the post offices. The big question is whether they want to save them. If they drag the process out long enough, the more difficult cases—those that open part time and those that are less viable—will be off the scene altogether by the time the Government produce proper suggestions to help the rest. Given the Government's track record, that seems to be the policy that they are following.

We read in the papers this week a suggestion from the Minister for Competitiveness that sub-postmasters are to become local consuls. We would welcome that, if it is recognition of the other services that postmasters provide in their local communities—the many things that they do, unpaid and unsung heroes and heroines in their communities.

However, apart from proposing that postmasters should be given a smart badge, which presumably was meant to flatter, the hon. Gentleman did not spell out whether there is to be any remuneration for them. If he has a practical business plan to put on the table that would help post offices by allowing them to provide services for which they would be remunerated, perhaps that suggestion would have some credence. This, however, is merely papering over the cracks to disguise the big problem that the Government have brought about.

As we all know, local people rely on sub-postmasters. If someone does not collect their pension one week, the sub-postmaster will notice. The sub-post office is often the calling-off point for the local doctor, who may leave a prescription there at no charge. The value that sub-post offices provide for communities is almost unquantifiable. That is why the last Conservative Government believed it was worth remunerating sub-post offices. We recognised the value of their contribution in the heart of vulnerable communities—unlike the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, who has accused sub-postmasters of telling porkies.

That does not sound to me like the view of a Government who are sitting down and talking to sub-postmasters about their problems. It is certainly not the opinion of the 3 million people who signed the *Western Daily Press* petition. Whatever the Prime Minister and other Labour Members say, there is now such a groundswell of opinion—clearly demonstrated by the size of the petition presented to Downing street—that the Government must either rethink, or come up with alternative suggestions pretty smartly.

Mr. Miller: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman once already.

The Government must either rethink or come up with alternative suggestions so that these businesses can not just survive, but survive next year. It is as urgent as that.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will indeed.

Mr. Winterton: My hon. Friend is presenting an excellent case. What advice would she give to residents of my hill villages of Kettleshulme and Wildboarclough, which are both in the Peak park, and the village of Higher Poynton, whose sub-post offices will close in the next few weeks? Am I not right in saying that such sub-post offices are critical elements of the success and the on-going potential of rural villages? How will the villages survive if this essential facility is closed?

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the rural communities that he and I represent, a fragile situation is deteriorating. He, along with other Members of Parliament, will have made his representations, because there is now a sense of urgency. All our constituencies contain dozens of sub-post offices which are now genuinely at risk, not in three years' time but this year.

Sub-post offices deserve better than the Government's action. It is no good the Prime Minister saying, as he said yet again today, that cash dispensers are the answer. People need bank accounts in order to obtain money from cash dispensers, and if a post office is to have a cash dispenser in the wall there must be a minimum number of transactions a week for it to be viable.

There is another problem, unless the Government announce today that they are to round up all state benefits into multiples of five. In my experience, it is not possible to obtain both notes and coins from a cash dispenser. Pensioners who prefer to draw all their benefit each week so that they can plan how to spend it will not be used to that, but they may now be forced to make more than one visit a week.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Mr. Davey, at my post office in Blockley, tells me that what is really threatening his viability is the fact that a circular being sent to all claimants informs them that their benefit must

be paid through a bank account. It does not tell them that, if they wish to continue to receive it in cash, they must opt out of the present system. If they do opt out and continue to have the benefit paid in cash, Mr. Davey's transaction payment will be cut from 12p to 1p. That is what is threatening his business.

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): The hon. Gentleman is wrong.

Mrs. Browning: No, my hon. Friend is right. It is true. The Government have made a virtue of the fact that it costs only 1p to transfer the money from the Department of Social Security to the BACS system. Apart from that, the Government have given no explanation of where the funding is coming from. There is certainly insufficient funding to make up for the loss of £400 million, which will be lifted out of post offices' revenue. That is where the problem is. The Government have made a Treasury-initiated decision. They do not have a clue how they will fulfil many of the pledges.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will in a moment.

If the Secretary of State is going to talk us through the payment streams of each transaction movement from the time that it leaves the Department of Social Security, we will welcome that. What is interesting is that the "Dear colleague" letter that we received this week contains no mention of that. One would have thought that, if the Minister for Competitiveness had the answer to that, it would have been a good idea to put it in the letter that was circulated to every Member yesterday.

Mr. Byers: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the reasons why there was a number of closures last year in the post office network was because of the misleading information put around by a number of Members? *[Interruption.]* We have just had a very good example of that misleading information from the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown). Benefit recipients have a choice: if they want to receive the benefit payment in cash at the post office, they will be entitled to do so. It is important that we put the record straight.

Mrs. Browning: I am afraid that the Secretary of State misunderstands the problem for sub-post offices. He has outlined what he believes to be his Government's pledge in relation to recipients. We would grateful if he explained how that will work, but the focus of the debate is income for sub-post offices. In the transaction, where is the income to come from for sub-post offices to make up the money that the Government—

Mr. Byers *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Browning: It is no good the Secretary of State shaking his head. That is where the loss of income will come from. Therefore, he must explain to sub-post offices how they will make up the income drop by way of transactions, for which he has been unable to produce an audit trail to show that money will be into post offices and those businesses.

This morning, in the Methodist hall, I listened to the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters offer the Government—although there was no Government representative there—the hand of friendship.

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I was there.

Mrs. Browning: If the right hon. Gentleman was there, he kept his head down at back of the hall. I am sorry that he was not noticed.

Those in the hall made it clear that they do not want handouts; they want to do business. They want a plan for the future. They need the Government to behave in a more business-like manner, to negotiate and to make decisions now, not in three years' time.

Tomorrow is the Secretary of State's birthday. I anticipate that he will receive about 18,000 birthday cards, one from every sub-post office, asking him to think again. They will tell him:

> For your benefit, give us today the answers that will benefit sub post offices—before it is too late.

In that spirit of friendship, I offer him a birthday card for tomorrow—the first of 18,000. I hope that he will listen carefully, if not to me, then to the 18,000 sub-postmasters, the 2,000 who have given up a day's work to come here and the petition containing 3 million signatures that the Prime Minister received this morning.

4.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

> 'welcomes the fact that the Government is committed to a national post office network and is taking steps to secure this; welcomes the Government's moves to plan the introduction of automated credit transfer; welcomes the Postal Services Bill which will enable the Post Office to modernise, so building up new business for the network; welcomes the investment of £500 million to ensure the network is computerised, so enabling a successful and modern network to emerge; welcomes the Government's introduction for the first time of criteria for access to Post Office services; welcomes the commitment to give benefit recipients the choice of having benefits paid in cash via a post office even after the switch to automated credit transfer is complete in 2005; and applauds the work of the sub-postmasters and postmistresses and condemns those who make their lives harder by talking down the network.'.

Mr. Bercow: Open the card.

Mr. Byers: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I shall open the card a little later. I am also looking forward to the present that comes with it.

I know that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and many other hon. Members have had the opportunity today of discussing with sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses and representatives of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters their concerns about the future of the post office network. I want to use this opportunity to deal with some of the concerns that have, quite understandably, been expressed by those individuals who often have committed many of their own resources to their business—a sub-post office. We are a Government who listen to the concerns of the communities that have

[Mr. Byers]

been affected. We have also listened, and we shall continue listening, to the concerns of those who are responsible for running the post office network.

We recognise the vital role that local post offices play not only in rural communities, but in our inner cities. Many thousands of post offices in our inner cities and in our rural communities perform a useful and important community function. We recognise that they have that important role to play.

Very often, the post office is the focal point of the local community, providing access to cash, postal services and other daily items. Very often, for the elderly and those who are less mobile, the post office is where their benefits are available. We recognise that.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I shall give way when I have made some progress.

The Government recognise the invaluable role that sub-postmasters and mistresses play in communities and the way in which they develop and deliver those important services. The Government's commitment is to ensure that people have convenient access to the services of Post Office Counters.

The Post Office is still the largest retail network in Europe. Some 60 per cent. of rural parishes have a post office, and more than nine out of 10 people live within a mile of a post office.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Before the Secretary of State tires himself, and possibly the House, with repetition of those pieties, will he understand that what we need to hear today is a clear and unambiguous statement that the Government will take time off from their current proposals and develop a serious, workable and practicable alternative?

Mr. Byers: I hope that, once I have had time to make progress in my speech, I shall have dealt with those concerns in a way that the hon. Gentleman will feel is not pious.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Secretary of State guarantee that, after 2003, on one side of the counter, when pensioners who currently do not have a bank account are forced to have one, turn up at the post office and draw their pension in cash, they will not be charged any extra money whatsoever—bank charges or anything else? Will they will be in exactly the same position as now? On the other side of the counter, will he guarantee that the sub-postmaster will receive a reasonable reward for the transaction?

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has already addressed that issue. [HON. MEMBERS: "What is the answer?"] The answer is yes. I hope that that will go a long way towards reassuring the hon. Gentleman and his constituents. That is the policy, and my right hon. Friend has already stated it.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Will the Secretary of State then explain to the House exactly what the components and total of the sub-postmaster's income deriving from that process will be?

Mr. Byers: I was answering the question of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) on a "reasonable" amount. These matters are all subject to negotiation. We are talking about something that will occur in 2003, which is some years away. There will be a process of discussion. We have a very good working relationship with the national federation, which enables us to talk about the details of implementing the transition to automated credit transfer, and we shall do that. However, the answer to the specific question of the hon. Member for Gainsborough is, quite simply, yes.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I was grateful for the Secretary of State's comments on the plight of urban post offices. I should be grateful if he explained to me and those of my constituents who visited Westminster today what choice will exist for those who can exercise a choice under the proposals, but who, in doing so, rob someone else of the choice of being able to continue to use the post office's facilities, because the post office will no longer exist? The viability of urban post offices is very much under threat, and many will disappear. In my constituency, probably half of them will go within two years of implementation of the proposals, unless the Government come up with a plan that will not only give security to postmasters, so that they can continue operating, but allow people to exercise choice in how they receive and use their benefit.

Mr. Byers: I was rather confused by the hon. Gentleman's question. There will be a choice. The Government are not prepared to compel people to have their benefits paid in cash at a post office. We are not in the business of compulsion. When we move to ACT between 2003 and 2005, people will retain the choice that they have now. Benefit recipients will continue to have a genuine choice.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I have a choice; I must give way to the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) first.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): What choice will pensioners have if by 2003 many sub-post offices have closed and there is no longer one nearby?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Post office closures have nothing to do with the move to ACT in 2003. However, changes to the network have continued for decades. Over the years, some post offices close and others open.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton made great play of the fact the number of sub-post office closures last year doubled compared with the year before. The figures show that closures have not doubled, although 383 sub-post offices closed last year. If she looks at the record, she will realise that the highest number of closures in the past 20 years was back in 1984-85, under a Conservative Government. Closures happen because

sub-post offices are businesses and people have to take business decisions. It is only right and appropriate that they do so. Any closures that happen today are not because of ACT, as that will not happen until 2003. In the period leading up to 2003, the Government intend to identify a new way forward for the network.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Byers: I must make some progress, but I shall try to give way to the hon. Gentleman a little later, when I have explained the new role that we believe the post office network can play.

The clearest demonstration of the way in which we want to develop the post office network is the fact that we are investing £500 million in equipping all post office counters with modern online computer facilities. We are giving the Post Office the commercial freedom that it needs to develop new services. Our Postal Services Bill allows for social and environmental guidance, providing the vehicle for guidance on access to post office services. That is why the performance and innovation unit in the Cabinet Office is carrying out an extensive study on how we can ensure a viable future for the post office network.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I remind the Secretary of State of what he told the House on 15 February. He said that it was a question of viability and added:

> The Government will consider very closely the need to include a provision that would enable a subsidy to be provided where appropriate to do so. Indeed, there will be a Government amendment to that effect.—[*Official Report*, 15 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 805.]

Why did the Government fail to table that amendment in Committee?

Mr. Byers: We have been considering the detail of such a proposal. I shall address the question of providing a subsidy a little later in my speech. I hope that I shall be able to give some comfort to sub-postmasters about the Government's intentions. There was never a subsidy under the Conservatives. Later this afternoon, I shall announce that when we consider the Bill on Report next week, we shall introduce the provision that I promised the House. We are doing that because we consider it such a significant development that we feel that it is appropriate to deal with it in front of the whole House, rather than in Committee where only members of the Committee can consider it. It will go a long way to reassure many of the sub-postmasters who are in London today that we are listening to their concerns and prepared to respond accordingly.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I want to make some progress. I have given way many times and I want to put on record the Government's approach to these important matters.

Many people, including those in the federation, recognise the importance of modernising the network. The Conservatives did nothing to help the Post Office to prepare for the challenges ahead. From 1992 to 1997, they frequently announced their policy to sell off Parcelforce and review the status of the rest of the Post Office business; but they did not even do that.

This is an important point, because it strikes at the heart of the money that has been made available to the post office network: by 1995, the Treasury had taken £1 billion from the Post Office. Over the next two and a half years, an additional £1 billion was taken from the income received by the Post Office. That money could have been used to invest in the network, but the Treasury came first with the Conservatives.

Under this Government, £500 million is being invested in the Horizon project and computerisation. We are helping the Post Office to adapt to the changes that are taking place, but that means taking what are often difficult decisions. We have heard the concerns about our decision to cancel the benefit payment card and move progressively to ACT as the norm for benefit payments between 2003 and 2005. That is the sensible way forward.

I want to explain the background to our decision. The previous Government committed themselves in 1994 to modernising how benefits are paid, and in May 1996 an eight-year contract was awarded under the private finance initiative to ICL Pathway. The aim was to automate post office counters and provide a secure and more efficient way of paying benefits, through a card.

By early 1997, still under the Conservative Administration, it was clear that the project was in difficulties. We inherited those difficulties. In late 1997, the project was incurring cost overruns of £600 million and was three years behind schedule and we had to consider whether it could be continued. We undertook a detailed review and in 1998 we tried to put the project back on course, but slippages continued. In October 1998, the key milestone for the start of live trials of the system was missed yet again. There were real and increasing concerns that, even if the card could be delivered, the technology was becoming increasingly out of date.

Mrs. Browning: Why, then, as late as November 1998, did the Secretary of State's predecessor say:

> I feel confident that the project will be properly completed..?

Mr. Byers: Because at that stage we were trying to put the project back on course. Following a further review early in 1999, we decided that the benefit payment card could not continue, because the problems had become overwhelming. We made the tough but right decision to stop the benefit payment card element of automation and instead to build on the existing ACT system as a means of paying benefits.

It is worth reminding the House that ACT was introduced and extended by the Conservative Government, for good reasons, not to threaten the Post Office network but to ensure that payments went to those who needed them in the most secure way possible.

Mr. Miller: My right hon. Friend should not attack the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) in such a way, because at least what she said contained more sense than the comments of the Leader of the Opposition, who said earlier that he wanted to reintroduce the system as originally planned. That would be crass stupidity. The previous Government told us on numerous

[Mr. Miller]

occasions that we could not introduce new services for post offices through Government because those were commercial decisions for the Post Office.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right and there is a conflict at the heart of the Conservatives' position on the issue. They introduced and extended ACT as a way of delivering benefits, for what were good and legitimate reasons. People have voted with their feet and have chosen to have their benefits paid into bank accounts. In November 1999, 50 per cent of new retirement pensioners chose ACT, and 54 per cent. of new child benefit customers did so. People are making that choice and the Government cannot and should not ignore those trends.

Mr. Nicholls: On 29 March, I put it to the Minister of State that the Government's assurances about the continuation of cash payments after 2003 were on the basis that the recipients would have a bank account. Being the honest man he is, the Minister of State dodged that question and would not address it. Is the Secretary of State now confirming that everyone will have to have a bank account after 2003, and that the Government will fund that; or is he saying that the Government have received an assurance from the banking industry that it will provide free banking? It can be only one of those two—which is it?

Mr. Byers: No, we recognise that for some benefit recipients—those who do not want, for whatever reason, to have bank accounts—we will need to have an alternative method. For those people, we are considering what alternative simple electronic money transition systems could be introduced that could be accessed through post offices. We are having this debate in April 2000 and migration to ACT starts in 2003, so we have the time—because we have given plenty of notice—to put in place a mechanism that will ensure that all those who do not have or want bank accounts have an alternative means by which their benefits can be paid.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I am not going to give way, because Opposition Members have had their chance. I have been generous in giving way, but they have sought to mislead so much in their interventions—inadvertently, I am sure.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): There are 3,000 sub-postmasters out there who want answers.

Mr. Byers: They will not get an answer from the hon. Gentleman, but they will get one from my speech.

The reality is that all benefit recipients who wish to do so will continue to be able to access their benefits in cash at a post office, both before and after the change to an ACT-based system. I repeat that we shall put in place a mechanism so that both before and after 2003 all benefit recipients and state pensioners who want to will be able to access the exact amount of their benefits in cash across the counter at the post office, without incurring a charge for doing so.

The Opposition may wish to compel people to have their benefits paid through post offices, but we do not accept that. People must have a genuine choice and that is what we intend to offer.

Mrs. Browning: I heard the proposals that the Secretary of State outlined for recipients, but how much will that be worth in income for sub-postmasters?

Mr. Byers: As the hon. Lady knows, no figure has been agreed and the contract remains to be negotiated. It is a commercial transaction and the figure will be reached in the normal course of negotiations. *[Interruption.]* They are businesses and the negotiations concern a commercial arrangement. I shall not take part in the negotiations. Does she not understand that? The Government intend to ensure that the benefit recipient has a choice. She needs to be aware of that. We are having useful discussions with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters about our broad approach to ACT and the new services that can be offered. The Post Office will discuss with the federation the detail of the agreements that are entered into. Contractual negotiations will take place, and there are many months between now and 2003 during which they can be concluded.

Mrs. Browning: If it is a commercial transaction that is a matter for business and not government, how is it that the Prime Minister takes credit for the installation of 3,000 cash dispensers?

Mr. Byers: I cannot see what relevance that has to the issue that has been raised. The hon. Lady made an important point when she talked about the amount per transaction that a sub-postmaster is to receive as a result of the changed circumstances. I am saying that that is a subject for commercial negotiations between the Post Office and the sub-postmaster. No doubt she will try to explain what that has to do with cash points. We are talking about different issues.

There are new opportunities for people to go to a post office and use its services. As I have said, benefit recipients will still be entitled to have their cash paid over in full in pounds and pence. People such as me will be attracted to post offices to get money from cash machines. I may spend some of that money in the shop, which is often linked to the cash machine and the post office. That is what should happen.

Mr. Duncan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: No. I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. David Heath I think that the right hon. Gentleman is making progress on this issue now. We look forward to his comments on subsidy later in his speech. The key issue is whether the Government will underwrite the integrity of the post office network. If, on the basis that it is purely a commercial matter, they are not prepared to do that, we shall lose the network. Will he underwrite it?

Mr. Byers: We intend to address the issue through access criteria, which the performance and innovation unit report will disclose some time after Easter. That is how we can address people's need for local post office counter

services. Access criteria can then be considered by the Post Office regulator when that person is in post. That is the appropriate way to consider the matter. It is all about access to the services that can be offered through the post office network.

Mr. Frank Roy (Motherwell and Wishaw): In my constituency, 80 per cent. of post offices depend for more than 50 per cent. of their business on the Benefits Agency. Any opportunity to increase their business will be most helpful. As for Link cash machines, will they not provide more business opportunities for sub-post offices? Those people who do not use post offices now will be able to when they are installed. They will then be able to spend the money that has been dispensed in the post office.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right. That is why the development of cash machines in post offices has been widely welcomed by the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters. It is a good example of the post office network taking a more commercial view of the new streams of income that can come into the network. It is important that we consider new ways of encouraging people to go into a post office and using the services there provided as well as those provided by the shop, which often runs alongside it. As a result, the sub-postmaster and the shop owner—often one and the same person—will have the dual benefits.

Mr. Duncan: We seem at last to be concentrating on the kernel of the issue. As a result of his policy, the Secretary of State will replace a certain, guaranteed, Government-sourced income for post offices with an uncertain, commercially negotiated one on which he cannot at present put a figure. Yet he says that their income will remain reasonable. Those two points do not stack up.

Secondly, if the commercially negotiated income is insufficient, the post office network will collapse. What will constitute a reasonable income, and by how much does the existing income of sub-post offices need to fall for the Secretary of State to deem it to be unreasonable?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman did extremely well to deliver that question without breaking into a smile. His views on the Post Office are well known. He wants to go down the route of privatisation. We know that the post office network receives financial support from the Post Office. That is the reality: if Opposition Members think otherwise, they are fundamentally wrong and do not understand how the system works. He is on record as saying that he wants to break up the Post Office and then privatise it. That view is shared by the hon. Member for Gainsborough, who has always argued for that option, as have many other Conservative Members.

We have to ensure that, where appropriate, the post office network has proper support. Our proposals in the Postal Services Bill will give the Post Office greater commercial freedom.

Mr. Leigh: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: I will let the hon. Gentleman into the debate in a moment. I know his views, which he has stated clearly. He is a man of principle on these matters and it will be useful for the House to hear his views. They may be quite helpful to me, too, so I shall be more than happy to give way in a moment.

The Postal Services Bill gives the Post Office greater commercial freedom. The real question is whether the Post Office will want to support the social role that the post office network can play. That is a real issue, and the Government intend to address it. In a moment, I shall inform the House about how we might do that, but I am sure that hon. Members will want to hear from the hon. Member for Gainsborough first.

Mr. Leigh: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, but he must be fair about this. When I worked at the Department of Trade and Industry with my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), the proposal was to privatise the Royal Mail. We recognised that sub-postmasters had always been private operators. There was never a proposal to privatise Post Office Counters. We always recognised that we had to maintain a national network of sub-post offices.

The Secretary of State must stop repeating that the Conservative party wants to privatise the whole set-up and that everything will go to wrack and ruin. That has never been our proposal.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman probably makes my point for me. He wanted to take Royal Mail and parcel delivery away from the Post Office. That would have broken the link with the post office network and put nothing in its place. That would have had a detrimental effect on the post office network, and it is one of the reasons why the network was so worried about the Conservative proposals. The then Prime Minister would not go down that route because he was worried about its political implications.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): On my constituency office wall, I have a letter from the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), the former Deputy Prime Minister. He was replying to a member of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, which vigorously opposed Conservative plans to privatise Royal Mail. In the letter, the right hon. Gentleman stated quite simply that he believed that the post office network should be privatised.

Mr. Byers: It is good to have that on the record. I hope that my hon. Friend will circulate that communication and not keep it pinned up on his notice board.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Byers: I will give way once more, but then I want to draw my remarks to a close. I also want to talk about the important matter of the financial assistance that we may be able to offer to the post office network.

Mr. Collins: I want to return to the vital issue of the income stream. What does the Secretary of State say to my constituent Mrs. Hilary Pavitt, the sub-postmistress of Kent's Bank post office near Grange-over-Sands?

[Mr. Collins]

She says that she will lose more than a third of her income under the Government's proposals. Is he guaranteeing to replace all that lost income?

Mr. Byers: I have two points to make. First, the hon. Gentleman's constituent will need to convince those who presently receive their benefits in cash to continue to do so. I am sure that she has a good relationship with them, so she need only tell them that they have a choice. People who want to continue with the status quo and have their benefits paid in cash are entitled to do so. They will continue to have that choice until 2003, between 2003 and 2005, and beyond 2005. That is what I would advise her to do to ensure that her customers stay loyal and keep receiving their payments in cash.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman's constituent needs to know that her post office will be automated as a result of a £500 million Government investment. She will be able to offer new services, which will result in new people coming in to her post office. That will give her new vision for the future. I hope that she will recognise that this way will provide her with opportunities that she does not have at the moment.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: I will try to if I have time, but I have already spoken for far longer than the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, and I want to provide Back Benchers with the opportunity to contribute.

I want to take right hon. and hon. Members through the subsidy. If the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has any further questions, he may put them after I have gone through how it will work.

I have already, I hope, made it clear that benefit recipients who want to continue to have benefit paid in cash in full at the post office will still have that choice. Next week, we will table a new clause to the Postal Services Bill when it is debated on Report. It will enable me to set up a financial scheme to ensure that essential services can still be delivered through a nationwide network of local post offices. Our key target is a viable future for the network. We want to ensure that the Bill covers all possibilities. It may well be that in future, because of changes that are being introduced, financial assistance should be offered to the network.

The power is a safeguard, intended to keep open the option of financial assistance. The Government believe that the Post Office should modernise the network and be able to provide new and updated services and products, developing alternative revenue streams to replace income that may be lost because of the transition to automated credit transfer beyond 2003.

We recognise the real concerns of many people throughout the country about continued local access to post services, particularly in rural areas and also in some of our inner-city areas. The new clause will provide an additional safeguard in the Bill to provide financial assistance if it proves necessary to do so. This underlines the Government's commitment to a nationwide network of post offices.

Mr. Winterton: I am sure that the Minister for Competitiveness will, if asked, tell the Secretary of State that some Conservative Members were not in favour of the privatisation of Post Office Counters. I happen to fall into that category. The then Government did not proceed with privatisation because of the number of Conservative Members who opposed it.

The Secretary of State is announcing some very encouraging proposals. Sub-post offices in rural villages are as vital as the village school and the village pub. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure me that his proposals will ensure that they survive so that our rural areas have the facilities that they need?

Mr. Byers: The important thing is that, through the amendment that we will introduce on Report, we are providing a mechanism that will allow financial assistance to be given. It does not exist at the moment, but we will put it in place. There will be opportunities to provide financial support if it is appropriate to do so. I am sure that it will make a big difference to many small rural post offices as well as some in the inner cities. It is a safeguard, and we intend to introduce it next week.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: I have already given way generously, and I want to draw my remarks to a conclusion.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said that I can look forward to 18,000 birthday cards arriving tomorrow. I understand that this is also good news for post office workers in Victoria SW1, who are likely to receive a bonus—negotiated by the Communication Workers Union a few years ago—as a result of the high volume of cards that I am likely to receive. They will have cause for celebration as well.

The network of post offices has never been static, but the Government must acknowledge the important community and social role played by individual post offices to which we should provide new opportunities. We can use the great strengths in the post office network to reach out to people and to give them access to information and services.

I want to see how we can use the local post office as the first source of information on central and local government services. We need a new vision for the Post Office of the 21st century. I want the local post office to interact directly and electronically with business, and to be a channel of delivery for electronic government. With the new technologies that we are giving to the post office network, all that is possible.

By giving the Post Office greater commercial freedom, investing in new technology and providing safeguards to ensure reasonable access to Post Office Counters services, we are helping the Post Office to adapt to change, expand its services and respond to changing consumer demands. We intend to work with the Post Office. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said this morning to

Colin Baker, the general secretary of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, we intend to work in partnership to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Will the Secretary of State confirm that he is talking about the possibility, for which there is as yet no substance, of replacing a loss of revenue that is certain and definite? Will he confirm that the Horizon project, as now truncated, deals only with the internal management and revenues of sub-post offices, and that it as yet does not have the functionality to deliver the banking and other services of which he has speculatively spoken? Will he confirm that he will not even go out to tender to obtain the necessary software until later this year?

Mr. Byers: The problem that we inherited was that the scheme concocted by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) was three years behind schedule. Our project will deliver automation for every post office by spring 2001. In addition, the changes that I intend to introduce to the Postal Services Bill next week will provide a safeguard and a mechanism. Even if we have to use that mechanism, we shall not have to do so until 2003, when ACT is introduced. We are giving plenty of notice of change, which will continue from 2003 until 2005.

For more than 150 years, the Post Office has been an important part of the social fabric of our country. The Government are committed to ensuring that it continues to play an important role in British society by building a modern, vibrant network fit for the future. We shall deliver that, and I commend the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.48 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I welcome the debate and pay tribute to the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, which has assembled one of the largest petitions ever presented to Government. It has been extremely successful in promoting its agenda, for which, as a small organisation, it deserves great credit. Colin Baker came up with a phrase this morning that captures, in many ways, what is so important about the network. He described postmasters and postmistresses as the general practitioners of Government, the people who provide communities with government services. The network comprises not just a group of small businesses that have fallen on hard times, but people who play a key role in communities.

We must focus on what is happening in businesses. Much attention has been devoted to the decline in numbers, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Anyone who talks to people who work in the post office network will confirm that behind those who have sold up stand many more who want to sell but cannot because of the collapse of asset values. Many more people would sell up their businesses if they could.

The Secretary of State made the particularly unhelpful suggestion that much of the crisis was caused by scaremongering by Opposition Members and others. We are talking about rational, hard-headed small business men and women who can make rational calculations about their future earnings and the value of their assets. If they have a crisis of confidence, it is because there is a crisis of confidence. That is what the Government are being called on to redress. We call on them to give a clear, unambiguous guarantee and undertaking to preserve the network. What the Secretary of State said today about subsidy is helpful, and it is an advance, but the Government still need to do a lot of work to remedy the crisis of confidence that underlies the closure programme and the collapse of asset values.

We keep coming back to the issue of the loss of income and what it means—what is the money flow. The answer to a question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), the former leader of my party, established that the loss of income by 2005 would be about £640 million. We have used the figure of £400 million, but it would be due to rise to something of that magnitude. That is the income that is being lost to the post office network.

It is useful to break down that figure and analyse what it consists of. There are two main elements to it. One is genuine technological advance. The automated credit transfer process is a technological advance; it replaces a cumbersome paper-driven operation with electronic switching. There is a real gain in productivity there, and no one seriously argues that that process should be stopped. The other element in the £640 million is the payment that would otherwise be made to the post office network for performing a genuine service, which will still have to be performed by someone.

My colleagues and I have been trying to establish through letters and questions to the Department of Social Security the split between the technological improvement and the fee income to the post office for services. It is a clear question, and the DSS does not deny that such a distinction can be made. However, it has told us that it is a commercial secret. That raises a fundamental issue. We are dealing with a transaction between a Government Department and a state agency, albeit a limited, incorporated entity, which the Government choose to regard as a matter of Government confidentiality.

Some colleagues will recall that we voted a few evenings ago on whether information leading to advice, as well as the advice itself, should be kept secret. We have a good practical example here. Information crucial to an understanding of the debate is being unnecessarily withheld. The issue will be pursued with the ombudsman, but we have great difficulty understanding what is going on, because the Government simply refuse to divulge the split between the technological gain and the remainder of the fee income.

Mr. Browne: I am listening with care to what the hon. Gentleman says and much of it I agree with. I understood the Secretary of State to say that the figure to which the hon. Gentleman refers was not yet known, so the split could not be specified. If I have misunderstood, perhaps the hon. Gentleman could point that out to me. I, too, am a great advocate of freedom of information, but unless the information exists, it cannot be withheld. Until the negotiations are concluded, the information cannot exist.

Dr. Cable: It is a perfectly fair question. I will happily copy to the hon. Gentleman a letter from a Mrs. J. Spiller of the DSS, who acknowledges that the information is available, but says that she will not disclose it because it is commercially confidential. That is a matter of record.

The Minister for Competitiveness, who has responsibility for postal services, is fond of using an analogy that is quite helpful. He talks about the need for

[Dr. Cable]

the Post Office Counters network to achieve a soft landing. One has a mental picture of an aeroplane with him at the controls and the runway in the distance. I think that we can see the outline of the runway, which consists of a new income stream that will come from a mixture of online government, banking services and so on. That is fine and clear. However, the problem with that mental picture is that the Minister is flying an aircraft that has no undercarriage—it has no wheels. The problem with the Government's story is how that landing can take place.

One of the key aspects is the replacement of the present income stream with one from banking services. That is an important and welcome part of the story. We need to break down those banking services, to find out what they are, how they will be provided and what benefit the network will derive from them.

The banking services have two distinct elements. One is the 3,000 cash machines, which are welcome if they provide an additional facility. However, there is still a question about the many people—especially in remote areas—who will continue to pay a charge for that service. Even if Barclays and the rest move away from their £2.50 charge, the hidden loyalty charges will remain. The public will not receive a free service—the bank will derive income from it.

A more serious and important development—although it is welcome—is that 10 banks have agreed to use the Post Office Counters network for the provision of banking services. That is an advance and represents a significant new vision for postal services. However, why are the banks doing that? After all, Barclays and the rest are closing down thousands of branches throughout the country. Why are they entering into agreements with the DSS or the Post Office to open up such services? The banks are not charities—as we are painfully aware. Sir Peter Middleton and his chums are the most hard-headed bunch in business. Why are they doing that?

One obvious reason is that the agreements represent an extremely good deal for the banks. Instead of providing traditional bank branches, with all their overheads, security costs and business rates, the banks will acquire a cheap facility inside post offices—while keeping their brand. As the Government are in a weak negotiating position, they will not ask much for that service.

The banks will gain in other ways. As people will be encouraged—we are told that they will not be coerced—to have bank accounts, new accounts will be opened. They will bring the banks deposits and spreads on those deposits. The banks will earn charges. Banks will do extremely well from the shift to automated teller machines, and from the provision of banking services. We should be asking the Government—and they should be asking the banks—whether they are getting the best of that bargain with the banks.

The broader context is important. Many questions are legitimately being asked about the operation of the banking system. The Cruickshank report referred to estimated excess profits of £5 billion—in other words, rates of return to shareholder value that are larger than the market—for an industry that does not run full commercial risks, because, of course, banks and their shareholders are underwritten by the lender of last resort. We are talking about a system which has excess profits and is not fully competitive muscling in on the closure of the post office network to earn a nice little penny.

Although I welcome the vision—the development of the post office network from mere post offices to centres for online government and for banking services—will the banks be required to make sufficient payment to the network for that service? I fully accept and welcome the idea that the taxpayer has to pay a subsidy for the post office network, but the banking system also has a social obligation—to deal with the problem of financial exclusion. Are the Minister and—especially—the Chancellor paying adequate attention to the extent to which the banks, as well as the taxpayer, have a financial obligation to maintain the network as it is?

The key issue raised by Members on both sides is that the post office network needs an absolute guarantee of its future. That guarantee will be partly met from subsidy and when the access provisions are identified. However, until then, the crisis of confidence will continue; asset values will continue to fall; and there will be continued closures in all our constituencies.

4.59 pm

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): When I read the first words of the motion—

> That this House condemns the Government's failure to provide a coherent strategy for the future of sub-post offices—

I could hardly believe my eyes, because those words come from a Tory party which, throughout its 18 years in government, was responsible for a colossal reduction in the numbers of sub-post offices, and indeed post offices, in this country.

During the Tories' period of office—more specifically, between March 1979 and just before the most recent general election—the number of Crown post offices declined from 1,580 to 606 and the number of sub-post offices from 21,213 to 17,731. In other words, over the 18 years of Tory Governments, there was a reduction of about 3,500 post offices. I therefore find it a bit rich that the Tories now have the audacity to suggest that they are the friends of the sub-postmasters. It was they who wanted to sell 51 per cent. of the shares in Royal Mail—in other words, to privatise Royal Mail—and no doubt it was the widespread outrage that was expressed at the time by employees and customers that caused the then Government to retreat. Frankly, they were more concerned with providing for profit than for public service.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): I wonder whether my hon. Friend is aware that, in the Postal Services Bill Committee, the Opposition spokespeople still argued time after time in favour of privatisation as their preferred solution for the Post Office. Is he aware that they are still sticking to that policy? I believe that that was the last time there was a major deputation to Parliament on behalf of the postal services.

Mr. Wareing: I am sure that that is the case, because in a debate in the House on 21 November 1994, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), who at the time was Deputy Prime Minister, at column 353, gave us the reason for dropping the privatisation proposal: not that

the then Government did not believe in it, but that there was too small a majority to get it through the House of Commons.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): The hon. Gentleman may share my concern that, in the Committee considering the Postal Services Bill, the Conservative Opposition proposed an amendment to reduce the threshold for the universal requirement for packages from 20 kg to 10 kg. That would have hit hard at the universal service, which is of great importance to rural services and the whole community. It was a clear indication of a desire to privatise.

Mr. Wareing: As I did not serve on the Committee, I did not know that, but it is the sort of thing that I would expect. However, having said that about the attitude of the Tories—who are, in a sense, irrelevant to the debate—I shall move on

There are very important grounds for concern. The announcement that, gradually, more and more benefit recipients will have to enter the banking system is probably the hottest issue in my constituency and throughout Liverpool.

I should like the Government to review their policy in light of several matters. Those who have a notion that, by the year 2005, a majority of the people in my constituency will have bank accounts fail to take into account the social variations between the area that I represent and other parts of the country.

The Library of the House of Commons published an interesting research document. It shows that it is not so much rural areas that will suffer, although I have no doubt that many villages will face difficulties. If my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his colleagues were to examine the research paper, they would see that the 20 constituencies at the top of the vulnerability list are almost all in urban areas.

My constituency is rated the 10th most vulnerable, but what do we mean by most vulnerable? In my constituency, there are 15 post offices and, in 13 of them, more than 40 per cent. of the work is related to the payment of benefits. A substantial proportion—87 per cent.—of the post offices in my constituency depend considerably on benefit work. At the bottom of that league table are constituencies such as South-West Surrey, Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells and Kensington and Chelsea. They are richer areas and fewer people in them depend on benefits. The consequences of the switch to payments through bank accounts are likely to be dire for my constituency.

Consideration should be given to social variations, and I recommend that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State consult the list that I have described. No one is against post offices and the Department of Social Security making use of technological advances, but we must consider in detail how such advances will affect customers and employees.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I am sure that my hon. Friend recognises that people have the right to have their benefits or pensions paid in cash. That is an absolute must. We must also guarantee a nationwide post office network and ensure that we do not lose it or allow it to wither on the vine in the way the previous Government did.

Mr. Wareing: I agree with my hon. Friend. I believe that the Government are sincere in their desire that there should be a proper choice between going to a bank or to a post office and between receiving benefits and pensions in cash or having them paid into a bank account. However, they have not taken into account social variations between different parts of the country.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wareing: I shall give way shortly.

For example, car ownership in my constituency is far below the national average, so many people rely on public transport. I know that pensioners in Liverpool receive, as they do in London, free public transport, but many people on income support will find it extremely costly to go to a bank, because there are only three bank branches in my constituency. There are moreover six wards in my constituency; in three of them there is not a single bank branch.

Mr. Gale: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wareing: The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) tried to get in first.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman expresses much common ground between all parties. However, does he acknowledge that no one accuses the Government of lacking good will? The problem is administrative; the Government have simply not worked out how to achieve the result that they seek. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with us and hon. Members of all parties that there should be a delay in implementing the arrangements until the new administrative system has been worked out?

Mr. Wareing: I agree, to the extent that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me about examining the details of the scheme more closely. However, he would doubtless privatise the Post Office. Our agreement founders at that point.

Mr. Gale: The hon. Gentleman referred to the lack of bank branches. Can he deal with the point on which the Secretary of State refused to give way to me? Why are the Government so hell-bent on implementing a costly programme to transfer pension payments to banks, which are reducing the number of branches in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and mine, when the junior Minister wrote to hon. Members today to extol the virtues of the Horizon programme? It has been rolled out in every sub-post office, which could deal with precisely the sort of transaction that the hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine want handled locally.

Mr. Wareing: The hon. Gentleman may have a point. However, the Postal Services Bill has not been enacted yet, and the problems that the hon. Gentleman and perhaps other hon. Members face in their constituencies already exist. They do not result from changes in the way in which benefits are paid.

I am worried about the sick, the disabled and the elderly in my constituency. A post office has already closed there, although that was the result of vandalism, not the problems that will beset post offices under the current proposal.

[Mr. Wareing]

Of course my constituents can go to a post office and draw cash under the proposals, provided that the post office exists. A move from a cash system of payment at the post office, which many of my constituents desire, means that those post offices will close down. Not only post offices, but nearby shopping areas suffer. The post offices will suffer not only through the change in the payment of benefit; their sales of newspapers and cigarettes will also suffer, and a whole range of shops in the area could be affected. Economic activity will decline and more jobs will be lost. The Government should tackle that problem.

The Post Office currently has a monopoly on services up to £1. The reduction to 50p is bound to have an effect and to endanger not only sub-post offices, but other businesses in the area.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, given that 500 post offices closed last year, and given the uncertainty of the impact of the changes on their profitability in future, many decent people who have put their life's savings and work into post offices are now witnessing the value of their businesses depreciate greatly? Those who want to sell them cannot get the money that they need for their businesses.

Mr. Wareing: I am not sure whether the figure of 500 that the hon. Gentleman cited is correct. He would probably be more convincing if he were able to offer options other than privatisation, because that would cause high Post Office prices.

We must remember that industrial relations in the Post Office have been transformed in recent years. *[Laughter.]* I do not know that the departure of the Minister for Competitiveness had anything to do with that. I am sure that he would have contributed to the improvements that have resulted from the measures to enhance competitiveness which arose from the negotiations between John Roberts, the Post Office chief executive, and Derek Hodgson, the secretary of the Communication Workers Union.

The union members readily accepted the new measures that were introduced by the union and management combined, but I do not believe that that acceptance will continue if we move away from the payment of benefits to recipients through post offices. Indeed, industrial relations are likely to suffer.

There are 15 post offices in my constituency. I fear that if the measures are implemented, those in areas such as Muirhead avenue, east and Baycliff road—as well as the Dog and Gun post office—will not survive for long because there are high rates of high unemployment and sickness and they depend on the payment of benefits such as disability benefit.

I hope that the Government will take heed of what I have said. The Tories' contribution to this debate is irrelevant, given their ideological commitment to privatisation, which is opposed by almost every Post Office employee. I have received representations from many people in my constituency, where this is a hot issue. I have also received representations from the Communication Workers Union, postmasters, the Liverpool chamber of commerce and, of course, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, which is leading the lobby today.

It is not enough to defeat the hypocrisy of Conservative Members, who have shed crocodile tears. I beseech the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary to listen to the people in our heartlands, where there is real opposition to the proposals on benefit payment changes.

5.18 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I wish to express considerable concern that the Secretary of State's speech did not reflect the real fear of tens of thousands of sub-postmasters and mistresses about their future and that of their business. I must tell the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) that the biggest ever red herring is the idea that the Conservatives want to privatise the post office structure. Does he not realise that sub-post offices are already privatised because they are private businesses? I have never been in favour of the privatisation of the Royal Mail. Indeed, at this moment, that is not part of the Conservative programme. We must ignore that red herring.

There is a lack of understanding on the part of Ministers of the role that sub-post offices play in the community, whether in Liverpool or in my villages, such as Dolwood and Southleigh, way out in the country. Part of the role of sub-post offices in the community is the payment of benefit.

I circulated a questionnaire to the 36 sub-post offices in my constituency. I want to tell the House about the feelings of those postmasters and postmistresses. They want a guarantee that they will be able to sustain their businesses in the future. That is not an unreasonable request from any business, whichever party one supports.

Some realistic suggestions have been made, which have not received sufficient emphasis in the debate. Local authorities have the right to give rate relief to sub-post offices. In many areas, that is not done completely. In my area, East Devon district council gives rate relief of 50 per cent. It would be much better for sub-post offices if they were given 100 per cent., as that would assist them generally.

Sub-post offices need to be able to generate greater income, and there are ways in which that could be done. The Government should arrange for sub-post offices to issue vehicle tax licences. There is a demand for that service, especially in the countryside, where people are some way away from a major post office where they can obtain a tax disc. Passport forms should also be available from sub-post offices. Why not? These small matters are not being considered in the debate, but they are realistic and would help the remuneration of sub-postmasters.

There was talk of subsidy. How much? How is it to be dealt with? Has it been agreed with the Treasury? I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will clarify the matter.

Few people know about the banking services that are already offered through post offices by Lloyds TSB, the Co-op and Alliance & Leicester. That is not advertised nationally on television, and only customers of post offices and sub-post offices would know about it. More publicity should be given to the availability of banking services.

The suggestion that cash machines should be installed in post offices overlooks the fact that the people most likely to use them are the elderly. I wonder how many

elderly people who do not have a bank account or a piece of plastic understand the operation of a cash machine and would know the PIN number needed to operate it. Such matters must be considered when we speak about elderly people, particularly those whom I see in my constituency, whether in the better areas of Budleigh Salterton or out in Dolwood, Southleigh and such places.

What about the possibility of taking out of a bank machine cash other than in notes? Many pensions are not rounded to a sum that would be payable in notes alone. I do not know of bank machines that will deliver £56.50. What will happen when an account is overdrawn? Does it become overdrawn? How is anyone to know? None of that has been considered fully.

I do not think that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) would be at all happy if his constituents could not obtain their cash on a weekly basis. They need the money in order to run their homes, and they will not be willing to receive it on a four-weekly basis. That has not really been considered either.

The Government seem to gloss over the idea that all this will come about when ACT is operating in 2003 and 2005. I can tell Ministers that I shall not be in the House of Commons then, but I can also tell them that many small post offices will be out of business by that time. There is no point in preparing a system for a group of businesses that will not be able to sustain their operations.

Fear of what is to happen has driven down the value of sub-post offices. It is now six times more difficult for sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses to sell their businesses than it was four or five years ago. Until now many people, on retirement, have bought sub-post offices, run them for some years using their savings as income, and supported themselves for the rest of their lives with the income from the sale when they have handed them on. Over the past few years, a host of post offices in my constituency have had to close because no one could be found to take them on.

I appeal to the Government to start being more practical, and to come to grips—as any business man should—with the problem of how to extend the incomes of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses. It is possible, with a little lateral thinking. If the Government could do that, I believe that thousands of people who are outside Parliament today would be very much happier.

5.28 pm

Miss Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale): I am struck by the sheer effrontery of the Conservative party. You were in power for 18 years, but you did absolutely nothing for the Post Office. I marvel at the sheer arrogance of it. You have collective amnesia.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. When the hon. Lady uses the word "you", she is addressing me, and I have nothing to do with these matters.

Miss Smith: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

For 18 years, the Conservative party did nothing for the Post Office. I know, because I was employed in the postal industry, that the Conservatives did not take one significant step to help the industry. A Post Office review took place between 1992 and 1997, but there was no outcome. The issue of privatisation was a shambles: was the Post Office to be privatised or not? If it was to be privatised, where would that leave the Post Office Counters network? Where would it leave the small sub-post offices?

The Conservatives are engaging in sheer opportunism. I will take no lessons from them about post offices. They cared nothing for the post office network; only of late have they begun to show some concern.

Mr. Duncan: Perhaps the hon. Lady could explain in all conscience why my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), when he was Secretary of State, chose the more expensive option of protecting the very network that we are debating?

Miss Smith: The more expensive option? To protect what? Let me go through some of the points in case Conservative Members have forgotten. Do they recall that, between 1985 and 1995, the Post Office was forced to hand over £1 billion of profits to the Government and that, despite having announced in March 1995 that they would reduce the burden on the Post Office, they subsequently hugely increased it and demanded a further £1 billion from the Post Office? Do they not realise that that money could have been invested in the Post Office network? We could have had computerisation of sub-post offices years ago. We should have had it years ago. The Conservative party caused unnecessary delays and, of course, there is the privatisation shambles.

Perhaps the Tories will remember that, during their 18 years in office, about one fifth of the Post Office Counters network was closed. They seem to have forgotten all about that. I worked in the industry throughout that period and I can recall no significant Tory Government measure to prevent the widespread closures. I recall no comments from Conservative Members at that time. They now have the cheek to say that we have no strategy or policy on the Post Office. What is their policy? Perhaps the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) will tell me.

Perhaps Conservative Members will tell me what their plans were for the Post Office. Were they going to privatise? During discussions on the Postal Services Bill, they said that they wanted privatisation. Today, Conservative Back Benchers have said they were not going to privatise and would not privatise if they got back into power. They seem confused about the whole issue of the Post Office.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Besides the confusion on the Opposition Benches, with Front Benchers saying that they are in favour of privatisation and Back Benchers saying that they are not in favour of it, Conservative Members say that they support the universal service obligation in the Bill at the same time as saying that they want privatisation. The two are not compatible.

Miss Smith: They certainly are not. Privatisation would have completely wrecked the sub-post office network. We have heard that sub-post offices are private businesses. They are, but they depend on the public side of Post Office Counters. I used to do stock requisitions for sub-postmasters, and used to send money to sub-post offices and do audits. I worked for a public organisation, the Post Office, not for a private company.

Sub-postmasters face problems that need to be resolved. Last Friday evening, I held a meeting with sub-postmasters in my constituency. The fact that more

[Miss Smith]

sub-postmasters were at that meeting than there are Members in the Chamber says something about the strength of feeling.

Sub-postmasters are concerned because there is a period of uncertainty. I understand that. No one likes change; it is difficult, particularly if people do not know what the future holds. I accept that some sub-postmasters may be having trouble selling their businesses because the future is uncertain. At the earliest opportunity we need to give as much information as possible to those people, so that they can carry on with their businesses.

ACT is already happening. To do nothing about it would leave sub-post offices to wither on the vine. They are already losing business. We know the arguments. All hon. Members know that, every year, sub-post offices lose business and close. We have to do something about it, and we have to offer them new business.

There is no point in Conservative Members going on about the payment of benefits, because we have to find other types of business, such as banking, for sub-post offices. Sub-postmasters and postmistresses do not want subsidies or hand-outs. They want new business, and I believe that we can help them to find it. Barclays and other banks are closing many branches, creating a real role for sub-post offices to play, especially now that they are being computerised and have the technology necessary to link up with other systems.

I visited a post office in my constituency and saw its new computer system, which is very good. Although of course they are having some teething problems, the system—it is a simple one—is generally working well. However, it needs to be connected with other systems, so that the sub-postmaster can offer banking facilities.

At my meeting on Friday, most of the sub-postmasters said that they would like to have a people's bank, which would not only be a community facility, but would offer a whole new opportunity. We need to help provide that opportunity. Sub-postmasters and postmistresses should be able to offer a cash-back facility to those who pay with a Switch card. We should examine the possibility of placing more lottery terminals in sub-post offices. We also need to provide more information to sub-postmasters on precisely how automated credit transfer will work. Until we can answer those questions, and until sub-postmasters have that information, there will be fear and uncertainty.

Mr. Evans: Having talked to the sub-postmasters and postmistresses in her constituency, the hon. Lady will appreciate that income from benefits payment sometimes constitutes 60 to 70 per cent. of a post office's income. She is therefore absolutely right that postmasters need more sources of income, derived from providing different services. Does she not agree, however, that the drive to move benefits payment from post offices to banks should be deferred until those new services can be offered?

Miss Smith: The hon. Gentleman does not seem to realise that ACT is already happening. When new pensioners are asked how they would like their pension to be paid, very many of them already opt to receive it in their bank account. We cannot re-invent the wheel. The change is already happening. The Government are grasping the nettle by saying, "This change is going to happen, so we have to find alternatives for sub-post offices."

Those alternatives will have to be found, and timing is crucial in doing so. Sub-post offices must have new business before ACT is implemented. If that new business is not in place, ACT should be delayed. However, we have three years to go before implementation. The Horizon project is already up and running in most sub-post offices. The initial difficulties with the project have been overcome, and the project is working well. We are now moving to the second stage, when we have to find new banking and other work for sub-post offices to take on. I believe that that is achievable in three years. I am sure that, at the end of the debate, my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness will be able to tell me what progress has been made.

I welcome the Government's access criteria, which will guarantee postal services for everyone. I realise that the status quo is not an option but, as I said, it is essential to get the timing right. New business needs to be in place before ACT is implemented. I believe that we can find that new business, and that sub-post offices have a bright future.

5.39 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): There are 120 towns and villages in my constituency. Some are very small and have never had a sub-post office and others have not been able to sustain one over the years, but a large number have one: there are 59 in all. I will not be able to give all the names as some colleagues have done, because it would simply take too long.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), I recently conducted a survey of all my sub-post offices. I asked people whether, if the situation continues as at present, they will have to close their sub-post office. In an 80 per cent. response, 60 per cent. said either that they definitely will or that they probably would. Even allowing for some exaggeration, that is a very high figure. Of that 60 per cent., 45 per cent. said that they definitely will. The danger is that all the footfall trade for the village shop is lost, so not only the sub-post office but the shop will go.

My remarks are based on that survey and on all the responses that I have had both from sub-post offices and from many of the constituents who use them. Some hon. Members have commented on the fact that sub-post offices have closed over the years. Of course they have, given the changing commercial pressures and life styles and the fact that so many alternatives are available and so many communities are too small to sustain them.

I readily acknowledge that that happened under the Conservatives, too, but the average during our years in office was 143 closures a year, and compared with that trickle we now face a flood. With the loss of the benefit payments on which sub-post offices are so dependent, many will close in the near future. That is why I share the concern of both Government and Opposition Members about the impact on the more disadvantaged, including elderly pensioners in rural areas who do not have a car. About 10 to 25 per cent. of households in villages in my constituency do not have cars.

That is why I said to the Secretary of State that the argument about pensioners having the choice of getting their pension in cash or through the bank will be an unreal one if the anticipated closures go ahead. There simply will not be a sub-post office there to dispense the cash. I share

the concerns about the impact on people who are very dependent on their sub-post office. I shall not quote any of the many letters that I have received on the subject, because it would take too long.

The real problem is not the fact that there is a three-year gap until 2003, when the ACT system comes in, but people's perception that it is on the way. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made the point very effectively that sub-postmasters are already aware of the likely fall in income that they will have to face. Many of them get very little income out of the sub-post office side of their business in any case. They foresee running into loss and they want to get out now. They will make that decision now unless they are given some clear idea of where future income will come from.

The Government have not yet found a satisfactory answer to that. I agree entirely with what my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon and the hon. Member for Twickenham said about some sub-postmasters trying to sell and finding it extremely difficult, with grim consequences for their lifetime's savings and investment.

People are acutely aware that the substantial income that comes from dispensing benefit payments will disappear. It is as though they are being told to get on the plank and that they will have to jump off in three years' time, without knowing whether there will be a safety net or how far they will fall. The problem is that they cannot step off the plank and find an alternative, because they do not know what they are going to do with their businesses.

I recognise that some of the sub-post offices would have gone anyway. They are often run by elderly people who perhaps cannot cope with the new computer era and will get out either by retiring normally or because they cannot cope with the pressures. However, younger people, who are computer literate, will not take on the job, so the sub-post office will go.

I deal now with the alternative services. I entirely agree that the potential for such services exists, and it is important that they be built up. However, I am bothered by the pious claim that such services will replace altogether the income that currently stems from benefit payments. I have studied carefully the letter from the Minister for Competitiveness sent to us on 10 April and other comments that he has made about the matter. The difficulty is that none of the alternatives look really viable and no figures have been attached to them.

For example, 3,000 cash machines will be installed, which is obviously desirable for the communities that they will service. However, 18,000 sub-post offices are threatened, and I suspect that few of the 59 in my constituency will get a cash machine. It is not a real answer, and many sub-post offices would also face technical difficulties in the installation of the cash machines.

The option that pensioners will have in the future of still being able to opt for cash payments will be a problem for the reason I have already given—many of the sub-post offices will close in the meantime—and because we do not know how that option will operate. Much of the thrust of questions from my right hon. and hon. Friends has not concerned the position of pensioners, on which the Government have given a guarantee, but the income flow for sub-post offices. We are told that that will be the subject of a commercial agreement, but the situation is so uncertain that, frankly, that is not much comfort to sub-postmasters, given what they will lose. That is also unlikely to be the answer.

The provision of alternative banking services has potential as part of the solution. The sub-post offices have a network that should be able to pick up a large portion of the business that Barclays and other banks will lose through their regrettable closures. However, some real difficulties arise. Technically, it looks as though much of the necessary software will not be put in place until 2005. That is far too long for sub-postmasters, who are seriously considering their future, to wait. I have not seen any conclusive analysis of the situation, but it seems that alternative banking services will not be a credible replacement for the loss of income that the post offices envisage. I am told that the estimate is that they will replace at most half of the income from benefit payment.

Another alternative, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon rightly mentioned, is the provision of other public services, such as driving licences, vehicle licences and passports. I am sure that the Minister is considering such issues and that it will be part of the unit's work. However, I suspect that that option will also face limitations and will not be enough to replace the loss of the benefit payment income. I wholly support all that is being done to look for alternative services, but they will not replace the 35 to 40 per cent. of income that the sub-postmasters know they will lose.

My final point concerns the need for the Government to give the guarantee that the sub-postmasters seek that the income they will lose in 2003 will be replaced. I should say first that I agree with my right hon. Friend that all the issues that have been raised about privatisation are a red herring and totally irrelevant to this debate. That is not only because the sub-post offices are privatised already, but because the income that will be lost comes from the public sector. It is the income that the sub-postmasters receive for delivering benefits. The question is whether private sources will supplement that income sufficiently to sustain the sub-post offices, or whether the Government should do something with public money to replace those payments.

Miss Geraldine Smith: The right hon. Gentleman says that privatisation is irrelevant and a red herring. Does he honestly believe that if Post Office Counters was privatised it would keep such a large network of post offices in rural areas? Would it subsidise small sub-post offices? The banks tell us what would happen if the Post Office were run by a private organisation. It is a public-private partnership, not a privatised business.

Mr. MacGregor: The hon. Lady has missed my point. We are talking about the loss to sub-post offices of payments from the public sector. They come not from post offices but from the Benefits Agency. That is why privatisation is irrelevant to the issue. The loss of business from the Benefits Agency is causing all the worry among the sub-post offices.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), in an admirable speech in Westminster Hall this morning, drew attention to the central issue. I recommend all right hon. and hon. Members who were not present to read it. My right hon. Friend was speaking from great experience as a

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Treasury, Department of Trade and Industry and Department of Social Security Minister. He said that the solution lies in the DSS area. When he was faced with the proposition to move to automated credit transfer, he was told—I am sure this is right because I have had experience of various Departments, too—that if he carried through the entire project as it is now being proposed, the loss of £400 million would close most sub-post offices.

My right hon. Friend went for an alternative solution, and that was the swipe card. I have received letters from the sub-post offices in my constituency asking why we do not go for that solution. Those who have written these letters say, "That was the solution that would have protected us and we support it", but we are told that it has run into great technical and other difficulties. For example, there are difficulties of delay and in terms of practicalities, and therefore it is no longer practical to pursue it. I do not know whether that is the position and nor does my right hon. Friend, although he has some doubts about how hard the project was driven by the Labour Government. Also, I do not know whether there are real issues that cannot be resolved.

Dr. George Turner: The right hon. Gentleman has talked much sense, but is he really proposing that the future of the Post Office lies in yesterday's technology? That is what he seems to be saying. Is he a supporter of the privatisation that his Front-Bench colleagues are urging? Is he supporting measures that will reduce by half the parcels that can be delivered within the present single cost structure? Is he supporting those on the Opposition Front Bench?

Mr. MacGregor: It is obvious why I think that the privatisation issue is a red herring in this debate. However, I and many of the sub-post offices that have responded to me understand the importance of keeping pace with technology. They welcome the arrival of computers under the Horizon programme, for example. The problem lies with the loss of payments that were previously coming through the benefits system.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden went for a solution that would have cost the taxpayer or the Treasury, however one likes to put it, about £200 million. I am talking in broad figures. The remainder of the £200 million under the £400 million would have been saved by moving away from the paper system to a swipe card, so there would be a cost to the taxpayer.

I now come to exactly the point that the hon. Gentleman raises.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is almost inconceivable that the swipe card should be impossible to deliver? Is it not rather the case that it is seen as something of a bore, and that the management systems for delivering it turned out to be rather inadequate? Is not the answer for Ministers to try to improve the management?

Mr. MacGregor: There are two ways of approaching the matter. Unfortunately, because I have not been party to any of the internal discussions and negotiations, I do not know what went on. However, my hon. Friend is right—one approach would be to go back and look at the matter again. I suspect that the DSS and the DTI came up against a problem with the project itself. The Treasury realised that there was an opportunity to grab the whole £400 million. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden resisted that because he recognised the impact on sub-post offices. If I were in the position that my right hon. Friend was then in, I would still be driving exactly along that line. The other approach is to look to replace the sums of money that would be lost, which my right hon. Friend would have protected.

This afternoon, I took down some of the Secretary of State's words with care. He said—this is in the context of an amendment on Report next week—that financial assistance may well be offered. To take the powers to offer financial assistance but not indicate the scale of it or the way in which it will be delivered will not help any of the sub-post offices. By the end of next week, we shall be in the same position.

The Minister must find a way of firming up that announcement so that it will bring comfort to sub-postmasters, who are thinking of getting out of the business. After all, the Government are proposing that quite substantial sums of public money should go to rural areas for rural diversification over the next few years. It does not make much sense to introduce subsidy schemes to encourage new small businesses when existing small businesses are being driven out through lack of financial or other support.

We know that the Government, in the case of Rover and BMW, are proposing that substantial sums should be made available to help the west midlands deal with the loss of jobs. The loss of jobs as a result of losing rural sub-post offices will be substantial as well.

The Minister needs to firm up the Government's position. He said in Westminster Hall this morning that the previous Government backed down in the early 1980s and 1990s on ACT proposals. I well recall those moments because I was then in government. There is sometimes a tension between the technological advances that we all want to see and the preservation of essential community services in rural areas. There is a balance to be struck. In the early 1980s and 1990s, we struck the balance in finding a way to protect essential local services in rural areas. At present, the Government have not done that, and I urge them to do so.

5.56 pm

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I shall keep my remarks brief, given the significant number of Members who wish to contribute to the debate which will soon come to an end.

I recognise that the problems of the sub-post office network are part and parcel of a pattern of difficulties that small businesses have had in communities both urban and rural over the past 30 years, whether they be butchers, greengrocers, ordinary grocers or small independent petrol filling stations. Many of these small businesses that operate to serve local communities have been hit by changes in shopping and retail patterns over the past 30 years.

The decline in the sub-post office network has taken place because in many areas people now shop and spend their money in a different way. That has led to a decline in small retail outlets in small communities, whether in urban or rural areas. That is part of the long-term pattern.

In the context of sub-post offices, we are facing the problem of the introduction of automated credit transfer. We know that ACT exists and that it has had an effect on sub-post offices over the past few years by eating away at their business of providing cash benefits across the counter. As the years pass and if we do nothing, more and more people will transfer to having benefits—pensions, child benefit or whatever—paid through ACT. The 40 per cent. of income that sub-post offices now receive through the operation of the benefits system will decline naturally as people transfer to ACT, irrespective of what the Government do.

The Government's problem was: "What do we do, if we leave the system as it is, to ensure that people continue to have benefits paid through the existing old-fashioned paper system. Do we try to stop people moving to ACT? Do we try to sustain the sub-post office network in that way? Do we recognise the change that is taking place and seek to build on it, and signal"—this is what the Government have done—"that during the two years from 2003–05 there will be a move across the board to ACT, while preserving the right for people to receive cash across the counter in sub-post offices? Can we use that as a trigger for discussions with sub-post offices on alternative revenue sources that can be introduced?" I very much welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's promise of subsidies where necessary to enable the businesses to be sustained into the future.

Sub-post offices are small private businesses, often run from their homes by married couples. The fact that the business plan beyond 2003–05 is not known creates uncertainty and undermines the resale value of those businesses. The Government have encountered a dilemma in attempting to move forward. Did they wait until every nut and bolt of the new system was in place, and until every question about new revenue sources could be answered, before they made an announcement about the transfer to ACT? If so, that could have looked like a fait accompli.

Alternatively, did the Government signal that, some time in the future, most benefit payments would be transferred gradually to ACT? In the interim, some payments would continue to be paid in cash through an automated system at post offices, but the majority would be paid into bank accounts through ACT. That interim period could provide an opportunity for discussion and consultation between the post office network and Government Departments on the development of alternative sources of income. I believe that the second option is the right way to proceed.

Mr. Letwin: Is not there a critical problem with that option? Given the complete lack of a plan, does not the hon. Gentleman agree that the period between now and 2003 is not sufficient? Should not sufficient time be allowed to put in place a proper plan, to ensure that people know that problems will be solved in time?

Mr. Borrow: I have made it clear in previous contributions in the Chamber on this matter that, as a matter of urgency, the Government must come up with the details of how the system will work after 2003. They have a responsibility to ensure that post office network representatives can work out business strategies for sub-postmasters and mistresses over the next few years.

Recently, I addressed the annual meeting of the Preston branch of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters. About 60 or 70 people attended a lively meeting, at which it was clear that federation members were not averse to change. Change is part of small business, and many post offices have had to change over the past 20 or 30 years and develop new lines. However, problems arise out of uncertainty.

That uncertainty cannot go on indefinitely. If the nuts and bolts of the proposals cannot be put in place quickly, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consult his colleagues in the Department of Social Security and to re-examine the time scale of the transfer. I have always made it clear that I support the transfer principle, but I want to ensure that my constituents in Lancashire villages have a viable post office network through which they can get their benefits and so on.

If it takes a bit longer than 2003–05 to achieve that, then so be it—that would be a small price to pay to ensure that the network is retained. In the months ahead, we must focus not on keeping things as they are but on ensuring that a robust new model for the sub-post office network is introduced. That model must be capable of being sustained, not for three or four years but for 30 or 40.

6.4 pm

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): I begin by thanking Keith Nicholls, who runs the post office in Stalham, and John and Christine Page, who run the office in Cromer, for coming to lobby me today. They appreciate the seriousness of the Government's proposals, even if the Government do not. They recognise that to lose 30 per cent. of their income, and possibly more, will damage the capital value of their businesses, put new entrants off going into the business, and lead to widespread closures of sub-post offices.

Many other people have written to me over the past two months. Many do not have bank accounts. Even when they have them, many want to take cash out every week and spend it in their local villages. In addition, many of them have a real understanding of and sympathy for those who live in the countryside.

A Miss Rowe from Gimingham in my constituency wrote to me to say that, over the past 35 years, her local village school has been closed, and the local shop. The local policeman no longer lives in the village, the resident priest has gone and the forge has closed. All that is left in that village—and in many others in Norfolk and elsewhere—is the post office. The post office is a vital hub of local services, especially in rural areas.

I want to draw three key facts to the Minister's attention. First, 2 million adults in this country, most of them pensioners, do not have bank accounts. If they live in the country, the frail, the elderly and those without access to transport often cannot get to a bank. Many of those pensioners are worried that they will not be able to get their weekly cash because their local post office will no longer be there. What choice do they have?

Secondly, 19 million people receive weekly cash benefits from local post offices. If they are forced to go elsewhere, much of the business that they currently

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conduct in their village, or locally, will go with them. As Mrs. Browning from the small village of Langham in my constituency put it:

> The weekly pension I collect gives the cash to pay the milkman, the coalman, and buy my paper and bread. If the Government's proposed changes are implemented, I will have to travel 12 miles to the nearest bank, which means I will spend less money in my local shop.

The knock-on effects on the local economy of closing a sub-post office are very significant.

In the country above all, poor transport means that local post offices are crucial for local people. Online banking and travelling long distances are not options for many, especially for old people.

My third fact goes to the heart of the debate. Most sub-post offices receive at least 30 per cent. of their income from benefit and pension payments. The footfall effect in offices that are in shops or which provide other services may increase that to more than 50 per cent.

How will that income be replaced? Nothing that we have heard today gives me confidence that the Government have thought through the implications of having to replace as much as 50 per cent. of the income of a sub-post office. We have been offered only the Secretary of State's vision for the future. There have been no concrete proposals, and those who run sub-post offices cannot exist on his vision. They need to know where the income is to come from, and how much it will be.

Many sub-post offices operate on the bread line, and are run more for love than money. People run such offices because they want to contribute in a practical way to their local community.

Two sub-post offices in my constituency have closed in the past year, at Tunstead and Saxthorpe. There is a growing suspicion that the Government are closing sub-post offices by stealth. The magazine *Saga* stated:

> There is a time bomb currently ticking away in Britain's villages and towns.

I am not sure that the Government fully understand that post offices are hugely important local community centres, where people can meet and chat. They are a vital part of local communities. It is no good giving people the right to choose automated bank transfers or weekly cash if there is no post office left from which to receive their weekly cash payments.

The uncertainty about the future caused by the Government's proposals for automated credit transfer is undermining the confidence of sub-post offices, destroying their capital values, putting off new entrants and accelerating their closure. That will have significant knock-on effects on local communities.

This project should be put on hold until the future viability of sub-post offices can be assured.

6.10 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I cannot compete with the large number of sub-post offices that the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) has in his constituency. Nor can I compete with the years of experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) and the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), nor with the experience of the Post Office that my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) brought to this interesting debate. However, I can articulate some of the concerns of my constituents. I welcome the spirit of all-party good faith from the hon. Member for West Dorset. We must put aside recriminations and move forward together on an all-party basis to get the best for our network of sub-post offices. Many right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about sub-post offices in glowing terms this afternoon and we all support them, or else we would not be here.

Talking down the network is damaging it. I know that there are concerns about a crisis of confidence among sub-postmasters, and I accept that that means that people make business decisions in that climate. However, I see a crisis of confidence among the customers of sub-post offices. When I met my own delegation of sub-postmasters today—and I shall not resist the temptation of naming them at a suitable point in my speech—Mrs. Nan Haswell, who has been communicating with me about this issue for some months, told me that she can, in her small sub-post office in the village of Dunlop, collect council rents. One of her regular customers was issued with a new rent book this week. She said to Mrs. Haswell that as the sub-post office would not be there any more, she wrote to the council saying that she would pay her rent directly through the bank. That is the effect that the crisis, which is to some degree generated by deliberate campaigns to undermine the network for political purposes, is having in some areas on the network of post offices.

Millions of people are signing petitions to keep post offices open, and tens of thousands of them are at the same time signing bank forms to carry out transactions that could easily be done through the post office. They are using banks to receive benefits or pay for services. The irony of that is not lost on me, and I hope that it is not lost on Opposition Members.

My delegation consisted of Mrs. Haswell, Mr. Mohammed, who runs an urban post office in a housing scheme in Whatriggs road in the Bellfield area of Kilmarnock, and Mrs. Dunlop who is the sub-postmistress in the small village of Fenwick. Their message was that they do not want any favours, they just want a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. That seems a reasonable request from honest working people and I, as their Member of Parliament, feel duty-bound to help them achieve it.

The complications of this issue have already been mentioned and concern the nature of the businesses. I do not propose to repeat what other people have said, but I think that there is potentially an important and bright future for these businesses in providing community services. However, I believe that that future depends on a partnership between the businesses, the Post Office—which is sometimes all too separate from those businesses—the communities, local councils, community councils, parish councils, local enterprise companies, training and enterprise councils and other local businesses. We have to work together to generate that community spirit, and the view that the resources are important to the community life not only of small villages and rural areas but solid urban communities, which are sometimes small villages within urban settings. The post office provides an important hub for some of those communities.

That cannot happen unless we do several things, including breaking up the centralised approach of the Post Office to the way in which deals are done for post offices rather than by them. Post offices in my constituency are told by Cascade telephone calls that services that they previously provided can no longer be provided because the Post Office has concluded the contract. That happened in one case with Scottish Power. No one explains to sub-postmasters that this important aspect of their business and income stream will be lost—they are told by a Cascade telephone call. They were told in my constituency last week by such a call that they have lost the right to sell BT stamps because BT has moved on to plastic.

I make a plea for the Government to engage with the Post Office to devolve power to the post offices so that the network, which is not a homogeneous lump of rural post offices or two homogeneous lumps of rural and urban post offices but a number of individual businesses, can work with the local communities, councils and local enterprise companies to generate the local partnerships that are needed to provide services.

Another example of how centralisation has worked against the post offices in my constituency is Girobank's recent insistence on a £1 charge for a transaction relating to the collection of council tax. The council has absorbed that cost for some time but can no longer and has had to tell people who pay their council tax that way that they will have to pay an extra £1 when they go to the post office. Sensibly, those people will not do it, because some of them are paying small sums such as £4 a week towards their council tax. Again, decisions are being made centrally that affect the income stream of individual businesses. There needs to be some flexibility.

My final point relates to the opportunity of post offices to take advantage of the current negotiations with the major banks to design and produce a bank account that can be operated at low or no cost, which will prevent people with small amounts of money from going into overdraft. It is important that the deal, which can, I understand, be done within weeks is properly funded by either the banks or the Government so that it can be put in place now. In that way, it can be ready for customers in time for the ACT changes. I understand from the managing director of retail services at the Post Office that that alone could generate £200 million of the £400 million income that the network receives from benefits payments.

In short, I do not believe that this valuable network of post offices should be made to depend on the payment of benefits or pensions in future. That is an unsustainable and unviable future. However, there are many opportunities out there. We must all co-operate to generate such opportunities, but we need considerable assistance from both the Government and the Post Office.

6.19 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I think that right hon. and hon. Members will agree that the debates this afternoon and in Westminster Hall this morning show that the Government are mishandling sub-post office policy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) advised us, the Secretary of State will be getting his cards in the next day or two—some 18,000 of them—from sub-postmasters.

The Government will be extremely foolish if they go ahead with the policy as it stands. They are out of touch not just with sub-postmasters but with their own constituency, as has been made clear in the debate. Many of the Government's aspirations are common sense, and we agree with them, but they do not add up to a viable policy. It is probably correct to argue that post offices should not depend in the long term on income from delivering benefits. I am a great supporter of the idea that the commercial banking system should subcontract provision of services to sub-post offices, particularly in rural communities. Horizon offers new conduits of business for post offices in the booking of theatre tickets and travel and so forth. All those things provide good opportunities.

The problem is that adherence to the automated credit transfer timetable is likely to cause the loss of one third of our sub-post offices. There will not be enough of a network to take up the opportunities. The Government must adapt their policy to address that problem, and there are several options. They must either provide a public underwriting of subsidies sufficient to sustain the post office network, which would allow ACT to be operative by 2003, or ACT should be postponed, perhaps for seven years but certainly until new revenues from bank subcontracting and Horizon allow post offices to phase in the income reductions that will result from ACT. The Government could also re-examine the Conservative swipe programme arrangements.

It appears that, of the projected £400 million saving on ACT, £100 million is purely from technology advance. The realistic reduction in payment is around £300 million. The swipe card arrangement is a compromise that would marginally reduce income to sub-post offices from benefit administration, but would allow them enough income to remain viable.

It was inappropriate of Ministers to criticise commercial banks for closing branches when the banks have made arrangements with post offices to provide services. The Government's own timetable on ACT is certain to result in closure of one third of our sub-post offices, and they have not made any provision to guarantee support for those post offices. In other words, the Government are being less helpful to customers than the banks are. The banks have done what they feel they must do because of advanced technology, but they have considered the impact and made alternative arrangements. The Government merely say that they must do what they are doing because of the need for ACT, and they could not care less about the people who have invested their life savings in running sub-post offices or about the public at large. It is humbug to criticise the banking sector while doing what they are doing.

I hope that the Government have received the message. They will pay a big political price if they have not. The most logical choice is to delay ACT until alternative revenues have come through.

6.24 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate as a supporter of a publicly owned post office network and a campaigner against the tide of financial exclusion that has engulfed many communities because of post office and bank closures. I also welcome it as a former deputy leader of Reading borough council, one of the few that installed a sub-post office in its civic offices and that was expanding postal services in its area.

[Mr. Martin Salter]

Labour Members will not be impressed by the crocodile tears of some Conservative Members. Their party presided over an unprecedented decline in the post office network. Over the past 25 years, one fifth of the network closed down. We all remember, to our horror, that we had a Conservative Government for 18 of those years, and it was that Government, in 1983, who introduced ACT.

I am partly reassured by statements from Ministers, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, that cash payments will be available after 2003. I welcome the announcement that a new clause will be inserted in the Postal Services Bill on Report to provide subsidy, and I welcome the £1 billion capital modernisation of the post office network. Even a luddite like me can see the value of equipping post offices with modern online information technology.

It would be nonsensical for the Post Office to continue to rely on purely paper transactions. However, it would also be nonsense to suggest that the future of the post office network should be predicated on huge benefit payments resulting from the kind of mass unemployment that happened under the Thatcher Government.

There is an urgent need to find new business to strengthen the Post Office and guarantee its future. Having been broadly supportive so far of the Government's approach, I want to sound a couple of warning notes. We have, to be honest, come to this matter rather late. Cash machines have their place, but I first came to the fight on bank closures in local communities because Lloyds TSB was installing cash machines instead of cashiers in banks in my constituency. What use are cash machines to someone who is blind or disabled? What use are they to a jobbing builder who needs more than £200 a day? Machines are welcome, but they have their limitations.

We need more than talk from Ministers, and from politicians of all hues, if we are to provide the vital new business of banking services in the post office network. Bank closures, which are engulfing many communities, present an opportunity to open up the post office network. Last Friday, Barclays shut 172 branches, leaving 84 communities without a bank, and that is the tip of the iceberg. We have seen 4,000 bank branch closures over the past 10 years. Deloitte and Touche Consulting Group anticipates a similar number of closures over the next few years—1,000 more communities will be bankless. Barclays's last-minute, face-saving deals with the Post Office are fooling no one.

We need measures to support small, district shopping centres in general because post offices face the same pressures as they do. A review of services currently available only at Crown post offices, but which could be available at sub-post offices, is also necessary, as is proper regulation of the banking industry. Access to redundant bank premises—or the capital receipts, where appropriate—would help post office modernisation and extension. A co-ordinated approach is needed by the UK banking sector, Post Office Counters and the Government to ensure that basic banking services are available the length and breadth of the land.

The Post Office is the best loved of all our public services. It belongs in the public sector. It is the fulcrum of community life. All we ask is that it should thrive and prosper in the 21st century. All that my constituents want is access to their own money. It is not too much to ask.

6.29 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): This is the third time that I have spoken about this subject today, something that I have in common with other hon. Members present. I shall take just two or three minutes at most. I wish to make one practical point, which has become clearer and clearer during the day. It has not yet entered the official doctrine of the Minister and his colleagues.

It is now almost five years since the swipe card system was first proposed. I have no knowledge of what went wrong with the administration of that system in the later years of its implementation, but clearly something did. In those five years, there has been a technological revolution. The Minister will be as aware of it as any other hon. Member present. Among other things, the extension of asymmetric digital subscriber lines and the presence of internet technology and IT-based solutions make it almost inconceivable that there should not now be available a simple and cheap variant of the swipe card arrangement, with or without cards, which would enable sub-post offices, with or without direct connection to the Horizon project and perhaps personal computer-based instead, to deliver cheaply and effectively the benefits and pensions that the Department of Social Security wishes to deliver at about the same cost as was originally envisaged.

I suspect that the way in which the DSS has traditionally gone about business precludes an approach that would work. However, the Minister is not at the DSS but the Department of Trade and Industry. He has the chance, through the Post Office, to adopt a modern solution that uses the technological revolution. The costs of installing remote computer networks have fallen not by half or a quarter but by perhaps 90 per cent. in the past five years. Whatever it would have cost then, it must be vastly less now.

I apologise for repeating the cri de coeur, but if the Minister will just give himself a little more time, personally take charge through the Post Office and remove from the hands of the DSS the means of implementing the changes on a cheap, cost-effective basis, we can get over the problem. We can find a way through that will preserve our networks and a system that enables people who are vulnerable and not particularly sophisticated to collect their benefits over the counter in existing sub-post offices throughout our land. Everyone will then be very happy and I promise the Minister that I meant what I said this morning in Westminster Hall. I will be the first to construct a statue to his memory if he manages that.

6.32 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): This is an important day for the future of the post office network, because hundreds, if not thousands, of people have travelled to the House to put their case. That was not stage acted: in the fine tradition of democratic lobbying, it was an endeavour with a serious point and purpose. Those people were not just representing themselves—a fact to

which the three million signatures on a petition handed in this morning readily attest. I congratulate all of them and hope that they have travelled safely from far and wide.

We have initiated this debate, not for the first time, because we have been leading on this issue and we shall continue to press the Government for the answers that they refuse to give. It is high time that they listened hard and answered in detail. Perhaps the starting point for that should be the debate, which I commend to hon. Members on both sides of the House as compulsory reading, initiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) in the Westminster Hall annexe this morning. My right hon. Friend spoke in detail and with devastating effect.

The Government's policy simply does not add up. They say that they want to protect the post office network, but they intend to rob it of its income. They then speak with certainty only of issues irrelevant to the problem that they are causing. We will not let them get away with that.

We have had a lively debate, and many hon. Members have brought their experience to bear. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing), even though he spoke from the Government Benches, was spot on. He essentially said, "No income, no post offices," and explained that that would hit the poorest hardest. Many of his constituents will be very hard hit by the Government's policy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) was rightly worried about post office closures in his constituency. Indeed, there have been more than 500 up and down the country since the general election. Let me be honest about the earlier figures. In the 18 years preceding the general election, there were 2,568 post office closures. Let us put that figure on the table. It is not 3,000, as the Prime Minister said from the Dispatch Box this afternoon. I doubt whether he will come back to the House and correct the figure. I am afraid that, if he did that on each occasion, it would become too habitual a duty.

The call is for the Government to be more practical. I think the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) must be a deeply confused person. She says that post offices do not want subsidies. She is right. They want incomes. She was unable to explain to the House where those incomes would come from.

Miss Geraldine Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan: In a second. The established income risks disappearing—

Miss Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan: If the hon. Lady will only listen, I have already said that I would give way. Post offices' established income risks disappearing before any new income appears on the scene.

Miss Smith: I have made it clear where the income will come from. We need new business for the Post Office, including banking facilities. I mentioned the words "a people's bank". It is no good doing as the Conservative party would and relying on benefits work. That would leave post offices to wither on the vine. The Government are trying to do something about it.

Mr. Duncan: The hon. Lady—like many of her Government's Ministers—has to realise that wishful thinking does not constitute a properly delivered public policy. Although she may have an idea that there should be a new income flow, until the Minister can describe the detailed way in which it will happen, her wishful thinking will count for nothing.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) said it all. I sympathise with him in choosing not to name all his sub-post offices. I, too, have more than 100 villages in my constituency of Rutland and Melton and many of them face a dire predicament. As my right hon. Friend says, the trickle of closures is becoming a flood and the anticipation of problems in the future is causing a big problem now. The income of post offices does not stand to be replaced by credible alternatives, and we need to know that it will be.

I hope that the House will forgive me if I do not rehearse all the arguments put by other hon. Members, including the hon. Members for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) and for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) and my hon. Friends the Members for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) and for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin). I would like to get to the kernel of the debate. Let us dismiss all the irrelevances that have crept in. Of course automatic teller machines will change the pattern of some cash collection, but they are not a solution and there are problems for people who do not want to receive their money in units of £10 or who simply cannot, and who need every single penny to which they are entitled. Indeed, there is the problem of charges. The Government may put 75p on the pension, but if £1.50 disappears in ATM charges, that ain't much of a solution either.

Privatisation is also a red herring. This is not a debate about ownership. It is a debate about the income that will accrue to those institutions that are already in private hands and will determine whether they are able to survive. It is a question not of ownership but of income. Only parliamentary discipline stops me expressing quite how irrelevant I feel privatisation has become to the debate.

Dr. George Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I must press on.

Let us concentrate on the one crucial issue to which we need answers from the Minister this evening—the income that individual sub-post offices will either continue to enjoy or be denied. This is all about income. If the Minister gives us decent answers on that issue alone, we will be satisfied with his response. It is the crux of the matter. Under the policy that the Minister is gradually implementing, the vast post office network—roughly 19,000 or more post offices—may suffer a loss of income of between 40 and 60 per cent. In practical terms, the Government are replacing a guaranteed Government-sourced income, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk said, with an uncertain, commercially negotiated income. Not only will that income be uncertain but it will be one of which the Government intend to wash their hands.

[Mr. Duncan]

As the Minister's letter to every hon. Member said:

> The amount that subpostmasters will receive will depend on the contracts that the Post Office Groups strike with banks and on negotiations between the group and the NFSP. These are commercial matters and it would not be appropriate for the Government to become involved.

However, it would be appropriate for the Government to tell the House and—more important—all those who have risked their money and dedicated their lives to the preservation of a widespread Post Office network what that income will be. Where will it come from? How will those people be able to continue in business? In the present climate, they do not need a crystal ball to work out that they face a certain reduction in their income, with no certain plans for its replacement.

The Secretary of State refused point blank to answer questions on that detail. It is shameful that, whenever the right hon. Gentleman is asked a question, he obfuscates and diverts the argument to something that is wholly irrelevant—privatisation or the fact that people can withdraw cash, in full, without deduction. That is good—as far as it goes. However, if, when a person withdraws 100 per cent. of their entitlement, the agent or intermediary who is providing the service that delivers that money receives the square root of diddly-squat in return, there will not be a Post Office network through which to deliver 100 per cent. of benefits. The Minister smiles. He always enjoys my use of language—we had "scragging" in Committee; now we have "diddly-squat".

If the Post Office network does not have an income that is sufficient to maintain its commercial viability, there will be no network. The only issue that matters is what the income for the Post Office network will be following the implementation of the Government's policy. The Minister does not need to divert the argument; he does not need to talk about anything else.

Let me summarise the matter for the Minister's benefit, so that he will be under no illusions. We know that the Secretary of State has not had a good month. With his failure to answer our questions on this issue, things are getting even worse for him. I have a few specific questions for the Minister. What will be the income of the sub-post offices—be they in urban areas or in rural areas, such as those that many of my right hon. and hon. Friends represent? How will that future income compare with that which they currently enjoy? Much of their present income is derived from a Government source, of which the Minister has control. It does not derive from a commercially negotiated arrangement over which they have less control and which is bound to produce a lower amount. What will be the components of their future income? In the new Labour world, how will the Post Office network income be made up?

To follow up my question to the Secretary of State—who replied, in effect, "Don't worry, they will all have a reasonable income"—what is a reasonable income? How much lower will a sub-post office's income have to be before the Secretary of State, in all his wisdom, would consider it unreasonable? What income does the Minister think is required to sustain a Post Office network of roughly the same size as the present one? How will the new arrangements be sufficient to replace the income that he is taking away from the network?

Given the activities carried out by post offices, and the services they deliver, does the Minister agree that income is much better than subsidy? I suspect that, in order to atone for much of what the Government know will happen, they will try to slew the arrangements away from income towards subsidy—I think that will come into next Tuesday's Report stage of the Postal Services Bill. They know full well that, if that is done, subsidy will wither on the vine in due course—away the network will go. If there is no income, there will be no post office: no income—no network. We need to know what the income of sub-post offices will be in new Labour's future world, when their policy is implemented. We want detail on that point.

Tomorrow is the Secretary of State's birthday. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said that 18,000 birthday wishes are winging their way towards him—even as I stand here. I hope that he will give proper answers to all those 18,000 hard-working people. In the meantime, it would indeed be appropriate if the Secretary of State got his cards.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): This is the second debate on this issue today; the first was in Westminster Hall this morning, when I heard several constructive contributions. During this afternoon's debate, we were asked—at least twice—to read the *Hansard* report of the speech made this morning by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). I commended the work of the right hon. Gentleman. I also pointed out that he was a politician of ability and effectiveness—that is obviously why he no longer sits on the Opposition Front Bench.

Furthermore, I noted that the right hon. Gentleman understood the arguments on this matter because the NFSP had held two previous, well-attended rallies at the House. As a member of the Communication Workers Union, I worked shoulder to shoulder with the NFSP on the Post Office Users National Council, so I know that the federation is a very effective organisation.

Those rallies were held in the early 1980s and the early 1990s; both were about ACT—as was the rally today. As this is an Opposition day debate, and as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) referred to the history of the Conservative party on this matter, we shall make the same point this afternoon that we made throughout this morning's debate: the Conservatives introduced ACT, for the first time, in the early 1980s.

The NFSP held a rally at which its members made several demands. First, they said, "No ACT." Secondly, on the back of the Rayner report—commissioned by the then Conservative Government—they said that pensions should not be paid fortnightly. Thirdly, they said that child benefit should not be paid monthly, but should continue to be paid weekly. The rally was most effective. The Government rejected the federation's arguments on ACT and on monthly payment of child benefit and went ahead with ACT.

The next rally was held in the early 1990s—when the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden held office—over the extension of ACT. Not only did the previous Government introduce ACT—they extended it in the early 1990s to cover benefits such as those for

unemployment and disability. The federation argued against extending ACT and the right hon. Gentleman advanced many arguments—recorded in *Hansard*—in its favour.

The right hon. Gentleman argued that ACT was an especially effective and secure form of payment. He argued:

> People are increasingly accustomed to receiving payment into their bank accounts: 70 per cent. of claimants have bank accounts, and many find payment into their accounts more convenient and safer.—[*Official Report*, 19 May 1993; Vol. 225, c. 259.]

He advanced further arguments on the benefits of ACT.

As a result of that NFSP rally—in which I took part—the right hon. Gentleman introduced the well-intentioned benefit payment card. We can forget all the Conservative hype and all their poor attempts at political point-scoring. "Why did the benefit payment card scheme collapse? Why cannot we return to it?" was a question put by the Leader of the Opposition at Prime Minister's questions this afternoon.

We tried hard to continue that system. The most instructive information available on the matter is in a report from the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which pointed out that, since 1 May 1997, the Labour Government had probably tried too hard to rescue the system—to pull the fat out of the fire. However, the Committee was extremely critical of that disastrous PFI—it was a turkey of a PIF. The Trade and Industry Committee made four points, on which we are still awaiting a report by the National Audit Office to the Public Accounts Committee.

However, the essential facts are as follows. The benefit payment card collapsed. We had to rescue the computerisation of the Post Office, and we have taken that forward. As a result, 5,000 post offices are already computerised, and by spring 2001 the whole network will be online under the Horizon system.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Johnson: I will give way in a second.

It is important that we should know, in this debate, where the Opposition stand on this issue; after all, it is an Opposition day debate. They need to tell us what they would plan to do. Would they have continued with a benefit payment card project that was three years behind, vastly overspent and heading for disaster?

We have been told time and again that the issue of privatisation is irrelevant to the debate.

Mr. Clifton-Brown *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: The issue of privatisation is extremely relevant, for the following reason. Conservative Members are still committed not only to privatising the Post Office but to breaking it up. As every sub-postmaster and sub-postmistress in the country knows, anyone who proposes ripping the Post Office Counters network away from the rest of the Post Office must be two foils short of an order book, because the Post Office depends on the Royal Mail for 24 per cent. of its income. Parcels returned to mail order companies create a major part of its income. Therefore, breaking up the Post Office is an essential feature of Conservative policy.

I give way to the hon. Member—I am sorry; the right hon. Member—for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis).

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman is right that the National Audit Office report will appear in front of my Committee in due course, but it will be some time before it does so. Will he undertake today to place in the Library immediately all the documentation relating to the costing, which we have heard amounts to hundreds of millions of pounds, of this PFI—I imagine that he meant PFI, not PIF, when he was speaking earlier—so that the whole House can be aware of the basis of this £100 million overcost now instead of, perhaps, in nine months' time, when my Committee considers it?

Mr. Johnson: I do apologise to the right hon. Gentleman. As I understand it, the National Audit Office has access to papers that the Trade and Industry Committee was entitled to see on a confidential basis, and that means that that report is extremely important.

The Opposition still labour under the misapprehension—this is crucial to the point made by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan)—that the Post Office Counters network is in the private sector. It is not. For the absence of doubt, let me explain to Opposition Members that sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have sunk £1 billion of their own money in in total, as private business people, subcontracting to a publicly owned organisation, driven from the centre in terms of policy, and actually driving forward a system where there is already cross-subsidy, so that the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses are not in control of the arrangements for subsidising post offices, or for cross-subsidising post offices, which is an essential element of keeping half the network open.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman is aware that twice in previous debates I have asked the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether, in turning the Post Office into a publicly owned plc, he would guarantee that the Government, if they continued in office, would never sell shares in that plc. Will the hon. Gentleman now continue that debate by guaranteeing to the House that that will never happen?

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Lady knows full well that we have made it quite clear on the face of the Postal Services Bill that any move to privatise the Post Office by any future Government would need primary legislation, which would have to pass through the House.

Mrs. Browning: Guarantee.

Mr. Johnson: We are looking for a public sector solution. The problem with the Conservative party is that it was driven by dogma; it could not see any solution other than privatisation. It was for those reasons that the Conservatives suggested breaking up the Post Office.

Mr. Duncan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Johnson: I will give way one more time.

Mr. Duncan: Given the time, may I respectfully ask the Minister now to answer the questions that I asked him about the kernel of the debate—questions about the future shape of the income?

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Gentleman thinks that he has struck the kernel of the debate. I consider that the hon.

[Mr. Johnson]

Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and other Conservative Members did so. I think that, if anyone did, it was the hon. Member for South Devon—[HON. MEMBERS: "East Devon."] I apologise. I believe that the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), and Labour Members, struck the core of the debate.

The core of the debate is the question, "How do we modernise the Post Office, equip it for the 21st century, attract new work into the business and then ensure a successful future for the post office network?" We shall not solve this problem—and the previous Government would not have solved it—by using the benefit payment card, which was a swipe card. It was an interim measure. The Post Office had said that it wanted to move on to smartcard technology. The contract was for only eight years, concluding in 2005, and there is every evidence that whichever Government were in power would be moving to ACT following that eight-year contract.

There was a problem in the early 1980s, and there was a rally in the 1990s, when sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses had to come to the House because of the problems that ACT was causing. We shall not solve this issue until we find a way forward that both ensures that there is a proper future for the Post Office in a modernised, computerised network and resolves the dilemma about how we can cause people to visit post offices to collect their benefits and pensions in an automated network.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Johnson: No; I am not giving way any more.

We are not saying that ATMs are the answer to the problem that has been suggested by Conservative Members. However, we are saying that, in a network of 18,500 post offices, the fact that 3,000 ATMs are now being installed where there were fewer than 200, will be a great help to the rural economy. We are not suggesting that we move to ACT, then look to modernise the network and then look to attract new work. We say that the first step, by 2001, is to computerise the network, the second step is to attract new work and the third step is to move to ACT.

We have had a very important opportunity today to debate the real issues that face the future of sub-postmasters throughout the country. An argument was made about the income of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses. One of the aspects of the Post Office's being a publicly owned service is that, every year, there is a negotiation between the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters and the Post Office to determine the unit payment per transaction. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton left out the part of my letter in which I pointed out that, currently, the figure negotiated with the banks was 17p. There is no reason whatever why that should change under the arrangements that we are proposing.

Furthermore, about 10,000 post offices do not depend on the transactions at all; they receive a minimum floor payment as part of a publicly owned Post Office's commitment to keeping post offices in rural areas. That does not depend on income.

The future lies in the Horizon project, and in the performance and innovation unit study. We have been criticised because the PIU has taken four months to produce a report; the previous Government were reviewing the Post Office between 1992 and 1997 and still did not come up with a response, and it cost £1.6 million of taxpayers' money.

The PIU report meets some of the points made by Members on both sides of the House, in that it will look across Government at ways in which we can utilise an under-utilised network, promote an under-promoted network and find new ways to attract people to come into the Post Office that do not depend on the constant battle against ACT, to which people are moving in increasing numbers, year by year. We can bring back network banking to rural areas. We can provide a modern Government service through local post offices. The very fact that the move to ACT is taking place in 2003–05 has galvanised the Post Office, the Government and everyone else into action, to see how we can bring new work into the Post Office. At the end of that, we guarantee that any benefit recipient or pensioner who wants to receive the payments in cash, in full across a post office counter and weekly—as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reminded us this afternoon—will continue to be able to do so. That is the future for the Post Office network.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 139, Noes 364.

Division No. 163] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne

MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John

Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 167.

Division No. 164] **[7.14 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*

Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Greg Pope.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick

Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the fact that the Government is committed to a national post office network and is taking steps to secure this; welcomes the Government's moves to plan the introduction of automated credit transfer; welcomes the Postal Services Bill which will enable the Post Office to modernise, so building up new business for the network; welcomes the investment of £500 million to ensure the network is computerised, so enabling a successful and modern network to emerge; welcomes the Government's introduction for the first time of criteria for access to Post Office services; welcomes the commitment to give benefit recipients the choice of having benefits paid in cash via a post office even after the switch to automated credit transfer is complete in 2005; and applauds the work of the sub-postmasters and postmistresses and condemns those who make their lives harder by talking down the network.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): We now come to the next motion, and I must tell the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.26 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the United Kingdom should continue to offer a safe haven to genuine refugees in fear of persecution; is concerned that the right to claim asylum in the United Kingdom is at present subject to widespread abuse; believes that the large proportion of unfounded asylum claims harms the interests of genuine refugees who are fleeing from persecution; notes that in 1999 there were over 71,000 claims for asylum in the United Kingdom, compared with fewer than 30,000 in 1996; further notes that the backlog of unprocessed applications stands at over 103,000, double the levels of 1997; further notes that the vast majority of asylum applicants are refused and are neither granted asylum nor exceptional leave to remain; further notes that fewer than 8,000 failed asylum seekers leave the United Kingdom annually as a result of Government action; deplores the 'soft touch' message sent out by the Government and condemns the Government for its failure to address the root causes of the present crisis; supports the abolition of cash benefits for asylum seekers but deplores the Government's incoherent and ineffective attempts to implement new arrangements for their support and the continued burden on local authorities; and calls on the Government to implement common sense solutions, including the increased use of detention and more removals of failed asylum seekers, to discourage bogus applications and address the current crisis, which is causing great concern to the people of the United Kingdom.

I preface my remarks by briefly expressing the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). She had been looking forward with relish to the debate, but a throat infection has silenced her in a way that Labour Members have failed to do over the past three years—and will continue to fail to do.

In the three years since the Government took office, the number of people claiming asylum in the United Kingdom has more than doubled, from 26,640 in 1996—the last full year of the Conservative Administration—to 71,160 in 1999. That means that last year the number of asylum claimants in Britain was roughly equivalent to the electorate in an average parliamentary constituency. The backlog of cases awaiting a decision from the Home Office has almost doubled, from 57,405 in 1996 to 102,870 at the end of 1999. I therefore make no apology whatever for the Opposition's decision once again to choose this subject for debate.

The truth is that the crisis over asylum policy is now arousing anger and resentment among our constituents and, if Labour Members are honest, among their constituents as well. People are angry about the transparent abuse of this country's long tradition of giving asylum to genuine refugees, and they are indignant that our asylum system is overwhelmed by bogus applications from people who are intent on evading our immigration controls.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): What would the hon. Gentleman say to my constituent who came to my advice surgery on Monday with his wife and daughter and told me that he had made an application in 1993, under the Conservative Government, and his wife had made an application in 1994, also under the Conservative

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Government, and neither of their cases had yet been resolved? Will the hon. Gentleman accept that the policies introduced by his Government were responsible for at least some of that delay of six or seven years?

Mr. Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening to my introductory remarks, he would have heard me say that under the three years' stewardship of asylum policy by the Government whom he supports, the queue and the number of applications have doubled. Despite all his lectures to me across the Chamber, he cannot escape from the fundamental truth that while his Ministers have had stewardship of this area of policy, the problem that he described has been getting much worse.

The anger and resentment of our constituents do not, I believe, spring at all from feelings of racism or xenophobia among the people whom we represent. Most people in this country are willing to welcome men and women who are genuinely fleeing for their lives. They are willing to give such refugees the rights to education, health treatment and family reunion granted by the 1951 convention—rights which in practice pretty well match those given by this country to its own citizens.

Most of our countrymen and women well understand the positive contribution that various groups of refugees have made to British life and British culture over the centuries. I cite the Ugandan Asians who fled Idi Amin in the early 1970s as perhaps the most recent example of such a group.

There is also widespread public understanding that the great majority of applications for asylum are indeed bogus, and that the negligence and chaotic mismanagement by the current crop of Home Office Ministers have brought about a state of affairs that is unfair to genuine refugees. The very people whom we have both a moral and a legal duty to assist, and whose cases should be determined quickly so that they can be accorded the rights to which they are entitled under international law, are instead left to shuffle along in a queue with almost 103,000 other case.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Lidington: I give way first to the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck).

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he aware that the average processing time is now down to 13 months? It was last down to 13 months in 1990. At no point during the 1990s was the processing time down to its present level. At the time of the last election, for applicants who had come in before 1993, the waiting time was 65 months. That is entirely down to the appalling mismanagement under his party in government.

Mr. Lidington: I am always delighted to have the opportunity to pay tribute to the dedication and professionalism of staff in the Home Office, whose efforts begin to make progress at times, despite the handicap of having to cope with the mismanagement of the Ministers to whom they report. I must tell the hon. Lady that at the current rate of decision taking, it will still take roughly five years before the Home Office can eliminate the backlog which the Ministers whom she supports have allowed to develop.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I join him in paying tribute to the staff of the immigration and nationality department. If he is so fond of their work, why did the previous Government offer redundancy to several hundred of them, an act which caused the disruption in the service?

Mr. Lidington: The hon. Lady will refresh her memory after the debate. She will discover once again the fact that at the time the Labour Government took office, both the backlog of applicants and the number of applicants were falling dramatically, as consequence of the measures introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). The Conservative Government were getting on top of the asylum problem. The current Government got in and the problems began to get worse.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): If the Conservative Government were getting on top of the problems, why was the delay 20 months at the time of the general election, whereas it is now down to 13 months?

Mr. Lidington: The Home Secretary can take no pride in a backlog that has risen from 50,000 cases to 103,000 cases during his stewardship of the Home Office.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman must answer the question. If the position was so good in 1997, why was the time that it took to deal with the backlog 50 per cent. longer than the corresponding time now—20 months then compared with 13 months now?

Mr. Lidington: The number of people waiting has doubled. If we examine the number of decisions taken during the past year, we find that until the last couple of months, the number of decisions was desperately low, at a time when the number of applications was rocketing. As regards decision taking, the Home Secretary was failing even to keep pace with the number of applications coming in.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Everyone in the House knows that issues to do with race, immigration and asylum excite real fears. Is it responsible to pretend that the challenge that we perceive from thousands of asylum seekers coming in has everything to do with the failings of the present Government, and nothing to do with the civil war that has been raging across the Balkans over the past three years?

Mr. Lidington: I intend to deal with that point slightly later in my speech. If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will respond to her point when I come to that passage.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Lidington: I give way to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), and then I will make some progress.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am grateful. The hon. Gentleman repeated again a moment

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

ago the argument that the vast majority—those were his words—of those who came were bogus asylum seekers. How then does he explain the fact that of the decisions made last year, according to the official figures, 36 per cent. were recognised as refugees and granted asylum, and 11 per cent. were granted exceptional leave to remain, so that even before appeals were turned down, 47 per cent. were accepted?

How does the hon. Gentleman justify the fact that the cost per household suggested in the Tory local election manifesto is £160, whereas the accurate answer is £24? Is that not just exaggeration to pander to prejudice, as Tories regularly do?

Mr. Lidington: I shall try to be generous to the hon. Gentleman. I shall deal first with his point about the figures for last year. If he looks more closely at the statistics for 1999 published by the Home Office monthly, he will see that between April and July 1999, when the Kosovo crisis was at its height, and before the United Nations suspended its evacuation programme in July and it became safe for people to begin to return home, there was indeed a very large influx to Britain and other western European countries of people from Kosovo who were fleeing ethnic cleansing there. That accounts for the statistic that he gave for the year.

If the hon. Gentleman looks at the subsequent months of 1999, he will find that the pattern that I described, where the overwhelming majority of applications for asylum in this country were found to be without foundation, was resumed. In fact, for the last month for which the Home Office has published figures, the refusal rate was back up to 90 per cent. of the total.

I am trying to be fair to the hon. Gentleman. There was a particular reason in three or four months in 1999 why a greater than usual number of applicants were accepted as genuine, but there has now been a reversion to the pattern that has been maintained over many years.

Let me deal with the hon. Gentleman's other point. I am quite happy to give him detailed accounts of the costs to local taxpayers of support for asylum seekers, but it comes pretty rich from the Liberal Democrats to start denouncing members of other political parties for exploiting the race issue. It is only few years hence, as I recall, that leaflets were distributed by the Tower Hamlets Liberal Democrats which were deliberately designed to exploit that issue. We read in this morning's newspapers that in Islington they have been up to their old tricks again.

With due respect to the hon. Gentleman, he should go and preach his sermons to his own party members before he comes and preaches them to us.

The present state of affairs is unfair to genuine refugees, and it is unfair to British taxpayers and British local authorities. They are bearing the costs of supporting claimants and their families. I am not talking just about Kent or the London boroughs, although they have borne the brunt; complaints have been received from Liverpool and Glasgow city councils, and Northamptonshire county council has unearthed £425,000 of alleged fraud on the part of people involved in housing asylum seekers under the dispersal scheme.

When confronted with what is going on and with public anger, the Government have two main excuses, both of which we have heard from Labour Members today. The first consists of blaming their predecessors. We expect that from the Government, because it is the most convenient substitute for a good argument and sound evidence, but after three years it has begun to wear thin. Let us look at the Government's own targets. Let us consult, for example, their 1998 White Paper entitled, somewhat humorously, "Fairer, Faster and Firmer". If we turn not to the headline but to the annexe—the bit that we are not meant to read in any detail—we find their targets for future years.

Let us look at the Government's published target for asylum decisions during 1999–2000: it is 59,000. When we look at the number of decisions that have actually been made, add up the monthly decision totals from the Home Office's bulletin, and add to that the total of 9,000 which the Home Secretary gave us in answer to oral questions on Monday, we find that the Government are going to undershoot their published target by some 9,000 or 10,000. That is not successful or responsible stewardship of asylum policy.

Let us now look at the published target for asylum seeker support. The target for expenditure in 1999–2000 is £350 million. What was the outcome? Well, asylum seeker support has gradually become more expensive as the financial year has progressed. In a written answer on 2 November last year, the Minister of State predicted that the £350 million figure would rise to between £450 million and £490 million; but today, in a written answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald the Government published a figure revised upwards yet again, to no less than £597 million. When we add that projected figure for the current year to the expenditure that the Government have undertaken since coming to office, we find that, in the three years of their stewardship, no less than £1.5 billion of public money has had to be spent on asylum seeker support.

Mrs. Roche: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving way to me again.

If the House had been ill advised enough to accept the amendment to the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 that was backed by the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), it would have cost £500 million a year to restore income support, in addition to what we are spending already. What does the hon. Gentleman have to say about that?

Mr. Lidington: I say that the hon. Lady should look at the record again. She will find that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald said repeatedly that we were prepared to support a voucher scheme in principle, but that we lacked confidence in the Government's capacity to deliver a scheme that was capable of working effectively in the way the Government had promised. *[Interruption.]* We tabled our amendment when the Asylum and Immigration Bill came before the House. The Government did what they usually do when confronted with an uncomfortable debate: they introduced a timetable motion. As a result, not only our amendment

on asylum seeker support, but 365 of 367 amendments that had been passed in the other place were not debated. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think we have had enough sedentary interventions from both Back Benchers and Front Benchers.

Mr. Lidington: As I was saying, 365 of 367 amendments tabled in the other place—mostly Government amendments, such was the chaotic nature of the drafting—were not debated at all by the House of Commons.

The Government's second excuse—here I come to the point made by the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott)—is that this is not their fault, because international crises have taken events beyond Ministers' control. Of course no Conservative Member would be silly enough to blame the British Government for the crisis in Kosovo, the actions of President Milosevic or the chaos in Somalia—although I find it interesting that, when an international crisis reaches a form of resolution, the Prime Minister usually tries to find some way of claiming credit for that success.

The question that I must throw back to the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington is this: how did countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, which were exposed to exactly the same international pressures as the United Kingdom, manage to reduce the number of applications during 1999, while—according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees—applications to the United Kingdom during that year rose by no less than 53 per cent.? Why has the United Kingdom now overtaken Germany as the country that receives more applications every month than any other nation in Europe?

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Is this not one of the reasons? In our newspapers we see photographs of camps near Calais, for instance, housing hundreds of economic migrants who are waiting to get into the United Kingdom. How can it be possible, under the United Nations convention, for a country such as France to allow that to happen? Surely, under the convention, people should claim asylum in the first country that they reach. How can the spread of such camps be justified—camps for economic migrants seeking to come to the United Kingdom simply because they think that our benefit regime is more generous?

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend makes his point well. I hope that the Home Secretary will give us an account of the representations that he has no doubt made to his French counterparts, and of the pressure that he has put on them to deal with those camps.

Many local authorities in London and elsewhere in the south-east are bearing tremendous burdens, despite the Home Secretary's recent and welcome move to extend the new support arrangements to Kent. Notwithstanding categorical assurances that the Government would be ready to introduce new voucher and dispersal arrangements from 1 April, the scheme seems to be hitting exactly the kind of trouble that Opposition Members predicted when the Asylum and Immigration Bill was before Parliament.

Last year, the Home Secretary told the House:

> New support arrangements have always been due to come into force in April 2000.—[*Official Report*, 9 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 982.]

On 2 February this year, he said:

> The full scheme will come into force from April 2000 . . . Dispersal will be on a no-choice basis as regards location.—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2000; Vol. 343, c. 1065.]

There was no mention of phased implementation, and no hint that local authorities would still be obliged to support in-country applicants, who make up about 60 per cent. of the total. As I have said, we are prepared to give the Government support on a voucher and dispersal scheme, but nothing in the Government's record to date gives us any confidence that they are capable of making such a scheme work effectively.

May I put a couple of particular points to the Home Secretary? I hope that either he or the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), will be able to respond to them later in the debate. First, are Ministers prepared yet to use the powers that they have under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to designate reception zones in particular parts of the country and to take central control of the dispersal programme, which appears at the moment to be incoherent and ineffective and which has aroused considerable mistrust among local authorities—by no means just Conservative local authorities—in many different areas?

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Before he leaves that point, does my hon. Friend recognise that the people of Kent feel very let down by the Government, who have failed to meet their financial commitment to Kent county council in the past financial year by £1.7 million, and who have failed and are failing to implement their programme of dispersal? Is the figure of 20,000 economic migrants whom the Government have failed to deport following decisions that they should not remain in this country remotely satisfactory?

Mr. Lidington: The Government's record in defending the interests of the people of Kent and in upholding a reputable system for handling asylum cases has been deplorable throughout their three years in office.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lidington: No. Secondly, a report from Sir Geoffrey Bowman to the Lord Chancellor was published in summary on the internet just this afternoon. It makes a number of disturbing claims about the likely future trend of judicial review applications in asylum cases. It is a serious review team. It is chaired by Sir Geoffrey Bowman and includes Lord Justice Simon Brown, Ms Anne Owers, director of Justice, and senior legal academics.

The summary of the conclusions of the report reads:

> The new asylum support provisions, and the limitations of the appellate system set up to deal with them, are likely to increase substantially the number of applications for judicial review.

If that prediction is accurate, it will be a very worrying trend.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lidington: No. I hope that the Government will take urgent action to set that right. If the Press Association

[Mr. Lidington]

report of the review is accurate, the judge warns of an extra work load, which is likely to be somewhere between "substantial and a flood," and calls for urgent action to clear up the backlog before the autumn. If he is correct in his predictions, the time available to the Government to take corrective action is very limited.

I turn to the measures that we have proposed and which we urge the Government to accept. First, we need an increased use of detention. It is not some draconian or inhumane policy, but a system that is widely used by other European countries whose asylum problems are comparable with our own. Such a system, making greater use of reception centres, would deter bogus applicants and ensure that, when an application has been refused, the authorities know where the person is and can ensure his removal quickly from this country.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lidington: No.

Secondly, we urge the Government to establish a removals agency with power to arrest and to detain people—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman who is addressing the House will not give way. That being so, Members should resume their seats.

Mr. Lidington: We wish the Government to establish a removals agency with power to arrest and detain people who have no right to remain here. We must ensure that many more asylum seekers whose claim is rejected actually leave the United Kingdom. The Home Office admits that at least 20,000 failed asylum seekers have simply disappeared. Other estimates put that figure much higher. Allowing thousands of failed applicants to disappear sends out entirely the wrong message, as does taking no action against those who employ them illegally.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lidington: No.

In opposition, the Labour party denounced the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 as racist.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lidington: No. Labour said then that it would not implement our checks against illegal working because they, too, were racist. Two years on, they had an apparent change of heart. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), announced to the House:

> Illegal working is a growing global problem.

He went on to condemn what he called the "sweatshop economy", and exploitative employers and racketeers. He spoke of considerable abuse. Any conversion is always welcome, but I fear that the tough words were not matched by determined action.

The Minister advocated a much stronger and tougher message, but he had to confess at that time that there had been

> only one prosecution, which was very recent . . . The reason that we have not prosecuted more is that we were considering the issue carefully.—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 490-91.]

The Government considered; the Government thought; the Government reflected. What has happened?

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there has been only one prosecution under the present Government, but will he confirm that, under the last Conservative Government, there were no prosecutions at all?

Mr. Lidington: I must point out that the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 had been in force for a couple of months before we lost office at the general election. The Minister and her colleagues have had three years to get their act together and to use those powers. She gave the game away, however. She told me in a written answer—she will probably recall it:

> One prosecution has been brought thus far, in 1999.—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 676W.]

There we have it: one prosecution by June 1999; no more prosecutions by March 2000, nine months later—nine months after the Home Secretary and his Ministers had changed their mind about the powers in the 1996 Act because of what they believed to be systematic abuse and exploitation. So much for their commitment. So much for action. As on so many occasions, we see a Government who are all mouth and no delivery.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Does my hon. Friend find it absolutely unbelievable that the Minister of State should, of all people, complain about that? When she was the shadow Opposition spokesman for the Labour party, she wrote to *The Daily Telegraph* and said that a Labour Government would under no circumstances operate those provisions.

Mr. Lidington: My hon. Friend may have given the House the explanation of why, despite all the slogans from Ministers, the powers are not in practice being used, but it is not the only occasion when the Minister of State has eaten her words. If she looks back at the record of the debates in 1992 on the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Bill, she will see that, on Second Reading, she denounced in the most vehement terms any provision for taking fingerprints from asylum seekers; yet she now not only has charge of the compulsory taking of fingerprints from asylum seekers, but is trying to pilot through a pan-European fingerprinting system and fingerprinting database for asylum seekers. She will have the opportunity later to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that she will be able to give the House a full and apologetic account of the contradiction between her words then and her words now.

This country has for centuries been a haven from persecution for refugees, and that is a tradition that and I and the Conservative party believe that we in Britain must continue to uphold. However, that tradition of hospitality is undermined by large-scale, systematic abuse of our asylum law. The Government—by their negligence, complacency and incompetence—have undermined public

confidence in the law and betrayed the interests not only of the British people, but of the genuine refugees whom our law and international law have been developed to protect. The Government's record is dismal. I commend the motion to the House.

8 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, To leave out from 'House' to end and add

'approves the Government's comprehensive, integrated strategy to modernise the immigration and asylum system to make it fairer, faster and firmer; welcomes the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 which will overhaul the inadequate legislative framework created by the previous Government and will replace the chaotic asylum support arrangements introduced in 1996 which have imposed an intolerable burden on local authorities; is astonished that the Official Opposition voted in the other place to restore cash benefits to asylum seekers at a cost of £500 million per year; approves the measures being taken to tackle the smugglers and traffickers who profit from illegal immigration; approves the new civil penalty for drivers and others who bring illegal immigrants to this country concealed in their vehicles; welcomes the substantial additional investment that the Government is making to increase the volume and speed of asylum decisions; congratulates the staff of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate on achieving record numbers of asylum decisions; and supports the Government's commitment to protecting genuine refugees while dealing firmly with those who seek to evade the control.'.

I express genuine sympathy with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and genuine sorrow that, because of her infection, she has not been able to take part in this debate.

As the House will know, few issues excite more controversy, or pose more acute dilemmas of principle and practice, than asylum. By the end of 1997, it was plain that the basic structures established by the previous Administration were unlikely to withstand the test of time. Therefore, in a White Paper in July 1998 I proposed a clear strategy for reform. That strategy was translated into law in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, which is the largest and most comprehensive reform of the system ever introduced in the United Kingdom.

Those reforms will ensure that this country honours our moral and international obligations to those who are genuinely fleeing persecution. However, they will also ensure that we deal firmly with those who seek to use asylum as a means of evading normal immigration control. Our strategy is aimed at preventing and deterring unfounded applicants from entering the United Kingdom; speeding up the process once people are here; and dealing fairly and effectively with those who are accepted as refugees and those who are not.

First, let me deal with some of the points made by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington). In all his criticisms of the system—the unacceptable delays, the burden on local authorities, the increased numbers of unfounded applications, the lack of powers to track down organised criminals and racketeers—there is one common theme. As we all appreciate, Conservative Members do not like us to remind them of that common theme—which is that all those problems are the direct result of a legal and administrative framework established and implemented by the previous, Conservative Government.

Every single aspect of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996—including the so-called "white list", which the hon. Member for Aylesbury did not mention once—has been operated by the current Government in advance of the radical changes that we are introducing in our 1999 Act.

Who was responsible for the 1996 Act, which created the system that the Opposition—in what I consider to be wholly ill-judged and inappropriate language—claim has made Britain "a soft touch"?

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: Of course I shall give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. It was none other than he who was responsible for that Act. I am very happy to give way to him.

Mr. Howard: The Home Secretary knows perfectly well that the 1996 Act was working extremely effectively. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] The figures show that, in 1996, the number of applicants fell by 40 per cent. and that the backlog fell by 12,000. That is what happened under that legislation—until the courts intervened, effectively to subvert the legislation's effect. Why did not the Home Secretary legislate immediately after the general election to give that legislation its true and original meaning, rather than wasting three years in which the problem has spiralled out of all control?

Mr. Straw: I shall deal with each of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's points in turn. I am grateful for his notice of those points, which he gave in a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*. As I shall show, however, his Act failed.

Back in November 1995, the right hon. and learned Gentleman had the prescience to anticipate the Act's failure. Indeed, he wrote a long article in the *Daily Mail*, which said in the headline: "The Home Secretary"—the right hon. and learned Gentleman—"warns that if his Bill fails, the number of asylum seekers will double in five years". His Bill did fail. That fact, more than any other, is why the number of asylum seekers has increased.

Mr. Gale: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment.

Mr. Howard: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I am delighted to give way.

Mr. Howard: The Home Secretary knows perfectly well that the point I was making in that article was that, if that legislation did not get through Parliament—it was under the most ferocious attack from none other than the Home Secretary himself—the consequence to which I referred in that article would happen. The Home Secretary had it within his power to give that legislation its original effect. Why did he not do that, instead of wasting three years?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is wrong.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Gerrard: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: Allow me first to answer the right hon. and learned Gentleman, and then I shall be very happy to give way to my hon. Friend.

[Mr. Straw]

May I explain to the right hon. and learned Gentleman what happened after the passage of the 1996 Act? I should be very happy to place in the Library the figures on what happened after introduction of his Act. At first, the numbers did decrease. They decreased also—to 22,370 in 1993—after implementation of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993, which was supposed to solve the problem. However, after two years, the numbers had doubled. In 1995, to justify his proposals, the right hon. and learned Gentleman came to the House to speak of the relentless rise in numbers that had occurred under the 1993 Act—which had been introduced only two years before by the previous Government.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that the numbers had decreased by 40 per cent. The numbers did decrease, but—I am delighted to place the figures on the Table and to give him a copy of them—they were increasing before he left office. Moreover, they would have continued to increase.

The whole of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's claim is based on false statistics, showing that the numbers were decreasing, when they were not. The numbers decreased briefly, as they had in 1993, but then they increased. He is now erecting—neither he nor Conservative Front Benchers have ever done it before, at least within my hearing—a whole fabric around the idea that, if only we had appealed the Court of Appeal's decision affecting local authorities, everything else would have worked.

One of the major failings of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's arrangements in the 1996 Act—he cannot complain that he was not warned about it; he was warned not only by Labour Members, but by the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke)—was that social security cash benefits were to be continued for those who applied at the port of entry. That would ensure that they would continue to act as a major incentive for people to come into this country, whereas those who applied in-country, however genuine their application, were simply to be left destitute. That was the point. That was the policy. Those people were to get nothing.

Although the right hon. and learned Gentleman willed that end, he had neither the wit nor the guts to will the means to achieve it. In not one word or line of the 1996 Act did he seek to do what he knew, and was warned, that he would have to do: to amend the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Children Acts, so that local authorities had no responsibility to support those who had been left destitute.

Mr. Gerrard: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gale: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way in a moment.

What then happened is that some applicants—at least a third of whom were genuine—were left destitute. If civilisation means anything, it means that we do not leave people destitute—unable to eat, with no accommodation whatever—regardless of the foundedness or unfoundedness of their claim. That was the right hon. and learned Gentleman's policy.

What happened next? Applicants—in the case of R *v.* Westminster city council and others ex parte M, P, A and X—appealed. The court at first instance, Mr. Justice Collins, said that Parliament had never, ever changed either the National Assistance Act or the Children Acts, and that, therefore, those duties plainly continued. That was followed by an appeal to the Court of Appeal, which said exactly the same thing.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman now asks why we did not appeal. As a matter of fact, the Department of Health, which took the lead on this, and local authorities—Hammersmith and Fulham, which is a Labour authority, and the City of Westminster, which is a Conservative authority—did appeal. They dropped their appeal only with the prospect of the new national asylum support system. It may have been three years later, but the consequence of rushing through legislation then, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman now suggests we should have done, would have been that 14,000 people who were receiving support from local authorities would have been literally—I am not exaggerating—thrown on to the street and left destitute without food, housing or warmth. So horrible was that prospect that, in my recollection, not once during the passage of what became the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, did any Conservative Member move amendments to that effect, although they had every opportunity to do so. I do not recall the right hon. and learned Gentleman himself proposing that until now.

Mr. Gale: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall give way in a moment, as I always do, but first let me deal with the canard about the numbers rising.

The second factor connected to the rise in numbers is Dublin—not the city but the Dublin convention on sharing responsibility for asylum seekers across the EU. I was made sublimely aware of that convention when I took office in May 1997. It turned out that it had been signed seven years earlier by Mr. David Waddington, the then Home Secretary. It was extremely convenient to the previous Administration that it did not come into force until October 1997. However, it is law and it is binding on us.

Before the Dublin convention came into force, effective gentlemen's agreements with France and Belgium enabled us to return within days applicants who could and should have applied in those countries. We are constantly asked why we cannot send back people who are the responsibility of another EU country. I wish that we could, but the Conservative Government stopped us doing that when they scrapped the gentlemen's agreements and instead imposed the Dublin convention, which has led to huge bureaucratic delays and the right of appeal for those who should have been transferred to third countries. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, that is the truth.

Mr. Howard: The Home Secretary knows perfectly well, as he wrote to me about it only a few days ago, that the purpose of the Dublin convention was to facilitate the extent to which people could be returned to safe third countries within the European Union. The Home Secretary shares that objective. He has acknowledged that the Dublin convention is not working as it was intended.

His Government have had more than two years, with all the goodwill that they claim to have won within the EU, to get the Dublin convention to work as it was originally intended.

Mr. Straw: That is the weakest of many weak points that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has made so far. Of course he is right to say that the intention of the Dublin convention was to facilitate transfers between different EU countries. Not even I would have assumed that the Conservative Government were so daft as to sign a convention with the intention of making it more difficult, but as often happened under the previous Administration, there was a huge gap between intention and reality. I was complaining not about the intention, but about the reality and the fact that they did not think it through, just as they did not think through the 1993 Act. They certainly did not think through the 1996 Act. The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked me why we sought to amend it. I shall tell him. The gentlemen's agreements were bilateral agreements, which could easily be changed and they had to be scrapped under the Dublin convention.

I have often wondered whether we should simply scrap the Dublin convention, as it is mind bending in its bureaucracy and the difficulty that it imposes on good immigration staff sending people back. However, unless and until we had the agreement of the other 14 EU member states, we would have nothing at all in its place. So we have to continue with the Dublin convention. I have chaired article 18 committees of amazing tedium because of the structure that the right hon. and learned Gentleman established in order to try to get changes under the Dublin convention. We continue in our attempts.

The third factor was the previous Government's decision to downsize the operation of the immigration and nationality directorate and to impose a freeze on recruitment, all in the vain hope that the binding contract with Siemens would produce early and beneficial results. Staff numbers were cut by more than 500 at a time when applications were rising. By the time the Conservatives left office, the delay of which they are so proud was 20 months.

The previous Government were warned about that, and not by us. I know that, these days, he is certainly not regarded as a hero in the Conservative ranks, but the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) was once an immigration Minister. On 11 December 1995, at column 748, he warned that the investment that the previous Government intended to put into the new system simply was not enough to ensure that they could process the applications.

Fourthly, on why the number of applications have risen, I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Aylesbury say that no one should be so silly as to blame the Government for the civil wars in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Kosovo, Iraq and a whole list of other countries. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman spotted that, but I might have been forgiven for thinking that I was to blame, even during Home Office questions on Monday. The hon. Gentleman was complaining about the rise in the number of applications. Four countries—Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia and Kosovo—account for 31,000 of the 70,000 applications for asylum that we received in 1999. Applications from those countries have increased by more than 12,000.

This time last year, the Government were under pressure not to take fewer refugees, but to take more refugees. As the hon. Member for Aylesbury mentioned my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's role in the Kosovo war, I might add that, had my right hon. Friend not shown the statesmanship that he did in leading the intervention against the Serbians, Europe would be facing not thousands but millions of refugees.

Mr. Gale: I am grateful to the Home Secretary. I understand his desire to put some verbal distance between my request that he give way and his assertion that tonight was the first time that he knew of the recommendations by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). Is he willing to place in the Library the record of the meeting held between my right hon. and learned Friend, myself and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) in October 1997, in which every single remedy recommended this evening by my right hon. and learned Friend was mentioned? Unless the Government have a dishonest record of that meeting, he will find that all those recommendations and warnings were made then, but the Government took no action whatever.

Mr. Straw: That was certainly worth waiting for. I am delighted to place the minutes of that meeting in the Library. I am sure that there will be a queue a mile long of hon. Members waiting to read them.

Mr. Gale: They may be in for a surprise.

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman asserts that we should have put more than 14,000 people on the streets with nowhere to live, nothing to eat and no warmth, I am happy to give way to him again.

Mr. Gale: I am simply saying that the problems that were arising in October 1997, with the flood of immigrants from the Czech and Slovak Republics, had been drawn to the Government's attention by my right hon. and learned Friend and myself. The remedies suggested by my right hon. and learned Friend tonight were mentioned at that meeting. It is a matter of record and I am delighted that the Home Secretary has agreed to place the minutes in the Library. The record, if it is honest, will show what was said at that meeting, and the Home Secretary should have known about it then.

Mr. Straw: There was not quite a yes or a no in that. I do not remember the hon. Gentleman mentioning Slovakia and the Czech Republic earlier. I took early action on Slovakia by the imposition of a visa regime. We have always made our position clear, as we have in respect of Ecuador, Colombia and several other countries, and we shall continue to do so.

This is a short debate, thanks to the fact that the Conservatives decided to shorten it by voting twice on their own motion, but I want to set out the actions that we are taking to tackle the problems. We are strengthening our immigration control the better to tackle those who abuse the system. The immigration service is recruiting at least 700 operational staff this calendar year—a 25 per cent. increase—and a further expansion is planned for early next year.

[Mr. Straw]

We are also giving immigration officers new powers. The hon. Member for Aylesbury spoke about what I think he called a removal service, and suggested that we should give the officers powers of arrest. But for a new label on the door, we have done that: it is called the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The Act contains all the additional powers of arrest that any officers require to secure the better removal of those who are here unlawfully.

A crucial part of strengthening control is something that the hon. Gentleman was eloquent about in his silence. Not once did we hear anything either for or against the imposition, which came into force at the beginning of April, of a civil penalty of £2,000 on hauliers who are found unreasonably to have clandestine illegal immigrants in the backs of their lorries.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): We are against it.

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady, who has miraculously found her voice—I am very glad that I have been able to find a cure for her—and the hon. Member for Aylesbury owe it to the country, when they are setting out their plan for the immigration service and for tackling the problems, to say whether they will remove the penalty on hauliers who knowingly, recklessly or negligently have clandestine illegals in the back of their trucks.

Prior to implementation of the penalty 10 days ago, 2,000 or so people were being caught every month coming to the United Kingdom in that way. I am pleased to tell the House that the penalty is being used. Up to yesterday afternoon, notices of penalty under the legislation had been served in respect of 30 vehicles, three of which were dealt with in Coquelles in France, where the 12 clandestine entrants were returned to the French authorities. The right hon. Lady now says that we should not have that effective control, even operating in France. That is saying one thing and doing exactly the opposite.

Two vehicles have been detained, one pending payment in respect of 50 clandestines found in the back. No one is telling me that one can drive a lorry containing 50 clandestines and not know that they are there. That lorry has been detained pending payment of a charge of £100,000. The whole country will be delighted and interested to know that the right hon. Lady is on the side of the truck driver with 50 clandestines in the back, and not on the side of the rule of law.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I share the Home Secretary's view that there needs to be control of vehicles so that people do not seek to come in in the back of lorries or hanging on to the undercarriage, but by what legal method can an asylum seeker from Sri Lanka, Slovakia or Afghanistan, say, with family here get to Britain to make a claim?

Mr. Straw: Those who come through another European country—all those who arrive by road or sea must do that, unless my geography is completely inaccurate—should have applied in that country. Those who arrive by air, if they have not come from a safe third country, are our responsibility, regardless of whether they have broken immigration rules. That is how the system works.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The Home Secretary has been generous in giving way. While he is talking about whose responsibility the asylum seekers are, will he answer the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury, as well as in an early-day motion signed by several Labour Members who are now in the Chamber, that secure race relations in this country must be on the basis of central Government taking full financial responsibility for asylum seekers rather than leaving it to a few local authorities?

Mr. Straw: That is exactly the purpose of our national asylum support system. We did not believe that it was fair on a few local authorities, such as the London boroughs, Kent and the Medway unitary authority, to have those responsibilities, and that is why we are relieving them of them.

The figures show that we have reimbursed Kent every penny of the expenditure that is the responsibility of the Home Office. I accept, as I said on Monday, that there is £700,000 in dispute for unaccompanied minors, who are at present the responsibility of the Department of Health. I cannot make an absolute promise, but I hope that it will be possible properly to resolve that dispute. I accept that, subject to the issue of unit costs, which will always have to be a matter for examination, central Government should of course accept responsibility for what is a national, not a local problem.

When we came to office, an asylum decision took 20 months and the number of staff was going down, not up. By contrast, we are investing heavily in the casework system, and 300 caseworkers have been recruited, doubling the number. Altogether, there has been a 27 per cent. increase and 1,400 more staff have been taken on in the immigration and nationality directorate. In March, more than 10,000 asylum decisions were made—another record, and four times the monthly average for the last three months of last year.

The problem of multiple appeals was left completely untouched by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe. People could appeal against a decision, go to the tribunal and go to judicial review, and the moment a removal direction was issued they could appeal against it—three more stages—and then they could appeal against a deportation action. There was not a line in either the 1993 or the 1996 Act to deal with that.

Under the 1999 Act, under provisions coming into force on 2 October, there will be one-stop appeals. In the recent Ben James decision, the chief adjudicator said:

> This case underlines in a very acute way the necessity for the implementation at the first possible opportunity of the provisions contained in the Immigration and Asylum Act . . . in relation to one stop appeals.

In respect of the case, which had been going on for 14 years, he went on to say:

> it is very unlikely that—

had the relevant section been in force—

> this claim for asylum, which took many years to investigate and try, would ever have got off the ground at all.

Fiona Mactaggart: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that the numerous appeal rights have, rightly, been curtailed—with the widespread approval of those who have traditionally supported the claims of asylum seekers—places a real responsibility on us, as we make decisions faster, to make decisions of the best quality and to ensure that those fast initial decisions are accurate?

Mr. Straw: Yes. Not only have we taken on more staff, but at Croydon and the other offices a huge effort is being

devoted to ensuring greater consistency of decisions. In addition, the immigration appeal tribunal has been upgraded. It is now presided over by Mr. Justice Collins, a High Court judge of considerable experience. I commend him and all the adjudicators and staff in the Lord Chancellor's Department, as well as in the Home Office, for all the work that is being undertaken to ensure that the system is properly joined up and that higher-quality decisions are made than in the past.

Of course, we also have to remove people from this country as quickly as possible. Removals have not been as fast as they should be, not least because of the huge delays that have taken place. It is the delays in the system, more even than the total number waiting in the queue, that fundamentally lie behind the problems of removals. That said, 7,100 failed asylum seekers were removed in 1997 and, despite the difficulty of Dublin, that has been increased to 7,650 last year. Much better regional enforcement capacity is being established. An increase in the use of charter flights is being developed. The Oakington processing centre is operational and detention space is being expanded.

One of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Aylesbury and which has been a theme of this debate is the new system of asylum support. We had to introduce a new system, not least to remove the burden on authorities such as Kent and those in London. The national asylum support system started its work on 3 April. All new port applicants are now on the system. As I told the House on Monday, it will apply to all new in-country applicants in Kent from next Monday and will be rolled out to the rest of the country soon.

The new system replaces cash social security benefits and local authority provision with an offer of vouchers for food, clothing and essentials with a small cash top-up and one offer of accommodation outside the south-east. The package of support will ensure that no asylum seeker is left destitute, and will relieve the unfair burden that has fallen on councils in the south-east of England.

Somewhat defensively, the hon. Member for Aylesbury said that there was no place for racism or xenophobia in the discussion of asylum and immigration. I take him at his word, but I have to say that it is impossible to read some of the documents that the Conservatives have produced, including their manifesto and a press release from the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), without forming the view that they have an agenda other than that of solving the problem of asylum in this country.

In a news report in the Colchester *Evening Gazette*, the hon. Gentleman claimed that Essex taxpayers were having to pick up a bill for nearly £700,000 thanks to bogus claims, which equated to 90 new police officers locally. That report was based on a press release that the hon. Gentleman had issued, which claimed that asylum now cost London taxpayers £180 million a year, which was £63 per household and the equivalent of 5,000 new police officers. Throughout, it implied that local taxpayers were having to pay that amount, when the truth is—it is even half-admitted in the small print of the press release—that every penny is reimbursed by the Government wherever the unit costs are being met. Even if there is some argument about the unit costs, the difference on the most generous estimates costs £1 per local taxpayer per year.

Will we hear an apology for such propaganda, which is peddling a big lie? Given the signature that the Leader of the Opposition appended to the statement by the Commission for Racial Equality about the need for everybody to avoid inflammatory language and inflammatory actions, I say to the Conservatives that such stuff as that press release is reminiscent of the big lie. It is put out not because it is true, but because it is untrue and designed for one purpose only—to stir up anxieties where none should exist.

I am sorry to say that we have heard all this before. It is not as if the Tory party has an unblemished record on the issue of race and immigration. The hon. Member for Aylesbury mentioned the Ugandan Asians and some of us are old enough to remember the sort of stuff that emanated from the Tory Opposition in the 1960s, time and again. We do not have to look in the crystal ball, because we can see it in the book. In 1995, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) looks perplexed by the reference to the Ugandan Asians, but that subject was raised by the hon. Member for Aylesbury.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): The Conservatives let them in.

Mr. Straw: I am talking about the Kenyan Asian legislation in 1968. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said—

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I hope that it is a point of order.

Mr. Heald: Is it in order for the Home Secretary to say that the Conservative party was racist over the Ugandan Asians when it was the Conservative party which let them come into this country and protected them at the time of their deepest fear?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Those are matters for debate and nothing to do with the Chair.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Member for Aylesbury raised the matter, and I was referring to what happened in the 1960s, which some of us remember. Some of us also remember Smethwick and the fact that the Tory party could not bring itself to vote for the race relations legislation in 1965. We also remember something much more recent. In 1995, in an absolutely desperate article about how the Conservative party could win the next election, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, when he was head of the Conservative research department, said:

> Immigration, an issue we raised successfully in 1992, and again in the 1994 Euro election, played particularly well in the tabloids and has more potential to hurt.

That was the true policy of the Conservative party and the policy that it is continuing with the manifesto that it has just issued, which talks of asylum seekers "flooding" our country, in words reminiscent of a nastier age.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): This is a disgrace.

Mr. Straw: It is a disgrace, and the Conservatives should know that, although the hon. Gentleman has a better record than most of his party. Talk of flooding is wholly inappropriate, and such ill-judged language—

Miss Widdecombe: If it is so inappropriate, why did the Attorney-General use the word?

Mr. Straw: I would like to see the context in which the Attorney-General used the word. He certainly did not use it in the context of a party manifesto. I now do not know why the right hon. Lady is pleading illness. She has been muttering from a sedentary position and now she seems to think that she can have the luxury of making interventions when she did not even move her own motion.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: No. I wish to bring my remarks to a close.

Talk of "flooding" is wholly inappropriate, and such ill-judged language, whoever uses it, is plainly outside the statement of the Commission for Racial Equality, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees pointed out.

To use the issue of asylum to play the race card is a disreputable act for any party. Those who are tempted to do it should stop doing it. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald laughs about that, but she has come very close to doing so.

Conservatives seek to exploit the asylum problems of this country but they have refused to take any action to control unscrupulous advisers. They have failed to support our action. Indeed, they voted against our action to deal with clandestines coming in on the backs of lorries. However, while they simply and cynically seek to exploit the system, we seek properly to deal with it. We will not let the Conservatives deflect us from building a firm but fair immigration system that is worthy of this country's traditions and of its citizens' trust.

8.39 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Although this subject is extremely controversial, it is much better to have a debate where we can seek to establish the facts than not to have the debate and allow propaganda to be peddled, as it has been in recent weeks.

We last debated the issue on 2 February. Unusually, for reasons that the House may remember, the amendment that my right hon. and hon. Friends tabled on that occasion was selected by Madam Speaker. It ended by calling on the House to support the agreement made last year by the three main parties and the nationalist parties, which had been proposed by the Commission for Racial Equality, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Refugee Council. The specific wording of the amendment and the declaration was that we should

> not . . . use problems in the immigration and asylum systems in ways which could damage community and race relations.

As we try to deal with what is a challenge to this country and to every other country in western Europe and many countries beyond, I hope that it is appropriate to start by reminding all colleagues of what in our name our leaders signed up to only a few months ago.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I shall do so shortly.

As the Home Secretary rightly said, these are difficult issues that we share with other countries. It is ridiculous to suggest that the growth in the number of people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom—as in other countries in western Europe—is anything to do with the actions of the host countries. It is to do with the actions that have been taking place on our continent and throughout the world, of which everyone is aware.

Ms Abbott: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No. If the hon. Lady will let me get going, I shall give way in a moment.

As we deal with how to have an immigration policy and honour our asylum agreements in the context of international obligations, we must seek to ensure that we do nothing to add to the prejudice that already exists in this country in relation to people who come here, often with nothing, from other countries and who have no previous link with the UK.

Mr. Winnick: The line that the hon. Gentleman is taking is fully supported by Labour Members. We are against all forms of racism and xenophobia. However, will he bear in mind that when he says his good words in the House they are not necessarily echoed by a number of Liberal Democrat associations outside Parliament? What the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), said about one or two of those associations is well known to us. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear that much in mind. The line that Liberals take in this place is not necessarily the one that a number of Liberal activists take outside it.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly appropriate point. Sometimes people stray the wrong side of the line. It happened in the previous Parliament and we were clear in condemning it in the House. My then leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), condemned it, and the matter was dealt with. I take the hon. Gentleman's point. I shall not try to pretend that there is not an issue. As far as I can tell, the issue arises occasionally in each party at grass-roots level throughout the country.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No, I shall not give way on that point.

We must be careful that we give leadership. It is for us to do so. If we give the right leadership, it is up to our parties to follow it. If they do not, we must make clear what is acceptable and what is not.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hughes: No. I wish to make some progress and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott).

Dr. Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on this point?

Mr. Hughes: No, I will not give way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has said that he will not give way. That should be enough.

Mr. Hughes: It is often said that the test of a civilised country is how it treats its homeless, its destitute and the

less advantaged. That is true. In some ways, however, the better test of how civilised a country is, is how it treats the stranger at its gates. In many ways, it is by how we respond to such issues as these that we shall be judged in the international community.

Ms Abbott: I represent a constituency in the east end of London. Although I deplore the tone of much of the debate, some of us would take the hon. Gentleman's pious note a little more seriously if we did not have experience of the ruthless way in which some Liberal associations exploit race issues.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Lady makes an understandable point, and I do not condemn her for making it. I give her an undertaking, on behalf of my party, that we will seek to deal with any matter in our party that other people are concerned about. I hope that other parties will do the same.

Dr. George Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No, I have already taken two interventions.

Dr. Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must calm himself.

Mr. Hughes: Liberal Democrat Members will show leadership. I am concerned tonight with establishing facts and how to proceed, but I also want to deal in particular with the leadership of the Conservative party. The hon. Members involved are behaving disgracefully, and they deserve to be condemned. As the Home Secretary rightly said, they do not merely seek to pander to prejudice, they positively misrepresent facts in order to do so.

Mr. Woodward: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It is necessary to correct the language used by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and his grotesque distortion of statistics. He said that the vast majority of asylum seekers last year were bogus. The fact is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must know that interventions have to be brief. It sounds to me that he is making a speech.

Fiona Mactaggart: He is only giving the numbers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We need only one Deputy Speaker in the Chamber at a time—and this is a good Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Member for Aylesbury will know that, in 1999, 54 per cent. of asylum seekers were given protection, so is not what he said a grotesque distortion that will incite racism in this country?

Mr. Hughes: I believe that it was. The hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) is right about the figures, but—despite all the variations in the world situation—the average over the past decade is that about 40 per cent. of applicants each year have succeeded at point of application. It is absolutely untrue to pretend that the vast majority of asylum seekers, either last year or over the past decade, have been "bogus"—to use a word that we prefer not to use.

In tabling our amendment, we wanted to express how we see the issue in the world context. This country is worried about the numbers of people applying to come here, of whom there are between 20,000 and 70,000 a year. About 1 per cent. of all the people in the world who apply for asylum come to this country. Although many of the very poorest countries put up with huge numbers of people coming to their borders, there are those in Britain—one of the richest countries in the world—who seem to believe that we cannot manage to deal with the applications that come our way. Given the hugely greater challenges in central Africa and elsewhere, that attitude undermines our belief in ourselves and our obligations to others.

In Europe, we consider that the best solution is for the European Union to deal with the challenges at its borders. I hope that member states will work much more effectively to achieve a pan-European solution. For example, some EU countries positively want more people to go and live in them because of their employment prospects and age profiles.

Will the Home Secretary say how people can come here legitimately to seek asylum? I hope that he will accept that that is a proper question. If they cannot come by lorry—or even by aeroplane, in many cases—how can we fulfil our international obligations? There must be a legitimate way in which people can come here. If such a way exists and is known to exist, those who come here can be dealt with appropriately—more appropriately than those who scramble here illegally, or who are carried here illegally in vehicles that belong to other people.

The Tory election manifesto said that racketeers are flooding Britain with asylum seekers. We reject that, and do not believe that that is happening at all. We are not being flooded, in general or in particular, and it is not right to describe most of the people who come here as bogus. I say that because, until people have their case determined, it is not possible to know whether they are valid applicants. We cannot pre-judge applications. Each case must be judged on its merits. Some people who may have their cases turned down have come here because their life chance in their home country is hugely worse than it would be here.

Of course, some people may try it on; there are people who want to abuse and exploit the system. However, many people come here because they think that Britain is a good place to come to and they can succeed here. They want to follow in the tradition of hundreds of thousands of people who have, over the years, been received in this country, made their home here and made a huge contribution.

Many of us across the House are representative of families who have come from many parts of the world because of persecution or economic reasons. If we believe that we do not benefit from such an addition to our original native culture, we are doing ourselves and our international community a grave disservice.

Ms Abbott: Members of Parliament on both sides of the House have fallen into the habit of talking about

[Ms Abbott]

economic migrants in negative terms. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that economic migrants are the engine of great cities such as London and New York? Economic migrants, whether they are from Ireland, the Caribbean, Pakistan or West Africa, have helped to build London.

Mr. Hughes: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady. If those who think that it is wrong for people to seek to come here and better themselves thought about the number who leave this country every year to better themselves somewhere else, they would realise the hypocrisy of that position. The world benefits from people being able to move to where there are greater opportunities.

Mr. Iain Coleman (Hammersmith and Fulham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: Let me press on for a moment.

There is another valid point that the Home Secretary made about the Conservative party with which I agree. I say this not just to the leader of the Conservative party and the shadow Home Secretary but to the shadow Minister for London as well. It concerns inaccurate figures. A press release set out, borough by borough, the alleged cost to people.

Mr. Coleman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I have said no. It has been suggested that the annual cost per household of so-called bogus asylum seekers is £160. I have the manifesto here. The figures are not only wrong for the reason given by the Home Secretary, because most of the money is reimbursed, but because figures, confirmed by the Treasury, and given in answers to me and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) by the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), show that the cost per household is about £24. That is the cost of the system per year, but it has been exaggerated sevenfold.

Mr. Coleman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: Not for the moment.

We have to address the way forward, given these challenges. We must address whether it is right to keep the voucher system, which my colleagues who dealt with the relevant measure consistently opposed. The test of the system is whether it is cheaper or more expensive as well as whether it is right. We have seen no figures showing that the voucher system will be cheaper. If it is not cheaper, the case for a segregating system cannot even be made on economic let alone moral grounds.

Oxfam has severely criticised the voucher system and the argument has been made in reverse by others. Not only do people have vouchers which distinguish them from the rest of us by not allowing them the same facility to buy food or clothes, they cannot even get change, in many cases, when they hand in the voucher. Oxfam says that it will not take the vouchers because it is degrading to contemplate accepting a voucher that is worth more than what it pays for. Some of the commercial organisations that take vouchers regard the system as a revenue-making exercise.

If the voucher system is to stay, will the Home Secretary and his Ministers kindly revise it so that change can be given? In that way, the system might at least have the confidence of organisations such as Oxfam.

Dr. George Turner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No.

The Home Secretary asked how we would deal with arrangements on arrival. *[Interruption.]* It is a fair question, and we could have a perfectly proper debate on how to provide adequate accommodation. The Liberal Democrats assume that most asylum seekers are not criminals—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. On the Benches furthest from me, the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) seems to be making an awful lot of noise. We cannot have that when an hon. Gentleman is addressing the Chamber.

Mr. Hughes: The majority of asylum seekers are not criminals, and we cannot assume that people will disappear simply because they have come to the UK. People should be treated decently and humanely when they arrive. Only when there is cause to believe that they will break the law should liberties that they could otherwise expect to enjoy be removed.

We have criticised the Government as well as the Tories, but they are not in the same league. In the run-up to this week, there often seemed to be a danger that Ministers were beginning to adopt the tone or the language of the Conservative party. Our consolation came on Monday when the Prime Minister made it absolutely clear that the race card should never be played. From now on, I hope that the agreement by Ministers that words such as "bogus" will not be used will be adhered to in all circumstances.

Criticisms remain of the system inherited by the Government. That system was not just left, but largely put in place, by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, who sought to change the system's administration, introduced an untried computer system and took staff away at the same time. All that led to the problems of 1997. That was the Tory legacy, and the Conservatives have absolutely no reason to be proud of it. They left our immigration arrangements in dire straits.

Since then, the appointment of case workers has been slow. The Public Accounts Committee made it clear that it took a long time before adequate extra funds were put into the kitty. Will the Minister of State tell us what additional resources are now available for case workers? It costs about £400 to process an application, and £1,400 a week to keep a family. What additional resources will be provided so that the backlog of cases, which is adding to resentment, which in turn allows people like the Conservatives to pander to prejudice, can be considerably reduced?

No Minister should suggest that any application will be prejudged. The Home Secretary remembers my criticism of him on that. I understand his response, and, of course,

the hijackers of the Afghan plane had to be dealt with under the criminal law, but there was, to put it gently, at least a hint that he had taken a view, and he cannot do that and simultaneously honour our international obligations.

Another unhelpful set of remarks was reported by the press when it picked up on aggressive begging. I asked Westminster city council, which keeps ethnic records, how many beggars arrested last year had come from abroad. The answer was 20 per cent. We must not misrepresent people by suggesting that as they are asylum seekers or immigrants, they must be criminals too. People who have come here as immigrants are probably no more likely to commit crime than any other societal group. A police officer told me the other day that if we put 700 single police officers in such a building on £40 a week with nothing to do, we would have far more trouble out of them than we have from the asylum seekers in a building not far from here on the other side of the river.

The dispersal arrangements still seem to be shadowy, to say the least, and unsatisfactory in almost every respect. The Minister has an obligation to explain how many contracts have been entered into. My hon. Friends and I have consistently made the case that the idea of dispersal and of sharing the burden is reasonable, but only if people are sent to an appropriate place that has services and facilities and that is the sort of community in which they can settle. There is no sign that that has happened, but unless it does, bussing people around the country will have the same unsatisfactory consequences as one of the exercises of sending people to Glasgow so far.

It is a cause of considerable anger and frustration that those who have borne the brunt of the costs to date—the local councils—are still significantly under-resourced and have not had their full costs met. The figure for unmet costs is about £17 million. The local authority associations are still making the case. The Home Secretary made a comment about Kent on Monday. I understand the system, and that a tariff was set. However, as long as local councils are asked to pay bills for something that at all times should have been a national responsibility, there will always be the possibility of irresponsible people making mischief and causing trouble.

We hope that in the days to come and especially in the run-up to the local elections, the Conservative party will back off its dangerous approach. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in her criticism in particular of the Conservatives and less so of the Government last week, has suggested that it would be helpful if a meeting was held with her in the near future. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), the leader of our party, and I have accepted that we should have such a meeting, and we informed her representative today. I hope that Ministers will be willing to meet her representative again and that the Conservative leader and the shadow Home Secretary will do so too. I hope that they will go soon to see the people who are criticising them.

I hope that the Conservatives will realise that it does their party no credit to present our country as one that, when it deals with asylum seekers and refugees, in large measure deals with people who have no case and no claim to be here. Our country can afford to give our people good health, good education, a good police service and good pensions, but we can also afford to look after those who come to seek our help. Of course we must have a fair system, but we must also have a system that lives up to our best aspirations and traditions. We have been in danger of going far away from that in recent months.

9.3 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) referred to the way in which Britain has received people who have fled from other countries. My parents were such people. They were able to flee from eastern Europe, leaving most of the rest of their families behind to be slaughtered in the holocaust. I therefore want to say right away how bitterly I resent the cheap remarks of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) in likening capitalism to what the Gestapo and Hitler did to the Jews, homosexuals and all the other people who were murdered by the Nazis. Such a person is not fit to stand for public office, let alone be elected to it.

I have sat through immigration debates in the House for some 30 years, and there is none that I have approached with greater revulsion than the debate tonight: a debate in which the Conservative party has once again—as it always does when it wants to grub around for shoddy votes—played the race card. Last Monday the shadow Home Secretary, who has suddenly found her voice, besought my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to use the word "bogus" in the context of the issue that we are debating this evening. I am ready to use that word, because "bogus" is the ideal epithet to describe the Tory pretext for this trumped-up debate tonight. Asylum poses problems—as all hon. Members who represent multicultural constituencies are aware. However, for the Tories to say that there is a crisis, as they do in their nasty motion, is bogus. They talk of a crisis, but yesterday, the leader in *The Times* stated:

> at no point can it be fairly said . . . that the system was really "out of control". In proportion to population, Britain ranks but ninth in Europe in terms of asylum-seekers . . . There is some evidence that the backlog is at last shrinking. The time taken to decide whether to award asylum has been reduced by seven months and record numbers of claims are being processed. A vast expansion in the provision of full-time adjudicators . . . and the creation of a new tribunal centre with 12 courts should further cut the backlog.

Mr. Baldry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: No. Many Members want to speak, so I do not want to take up more time than I need to.

If there is a problem, it was inherited from the Tories—as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary illustrated in his extremely powerful speech. The Tories' legislative framework prevailed for three years until we introduced the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The Tories dealt with none of the genuine abuses.

Unlike my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary—through the 1999 Act—the Tories did nothing whatever to crack down on unscrupulous consultants and solicitors who actively encourage bogus applications for their own financial gain. I draw attention to the crooked and larcenous activities of Abdullah Azad's self-styled welfare centre in Manchester, which cons suckers out of huge sums. For example, Azad is refusing to repay my constituent Mrs. M. Mahmood of 5 Iqbal close £1,000 that he conned her into lending him to pursue a case that was solved by my contacts with my right hon. Friend—as he will be aware because we corresponded on

[Mr. Kaufman]

the matter. I call on the Greater Manchester police to investigate the fraudulent activities of this leech—this bloodsucker.

Most people believe that, when the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was a Home Office Minister, all she did was chain up pregnant women in prison. However, she has a record on immigration, too. In a debate on the Asylum and Immigration Bill in 1995, she told the House:

> The deterrent effect of our measures, by reducing the number of people who will try to take advantage of our system, should lower the number of persons who are lawfully resident and who also have to be looked after while applying for asylum.—[*Official Report*, 11 December 1995; Vol. 268, c. 793.]

If there had been one word of truth in that bogus claim, her so-called crisis would not exist.

In October 1996, the right hon. Lady made another wholly bogus claim. In a written answer, she stated that the measures taken by the Tory Government would

> strengthen our immigration control and . . . greatly reduce the incentives for those seeking to enter or remain unlawfully in the United Kingdom . . . The Government believe that it is wrong that people who are admitted to this country on the basis that they can provide for themselves or who are here illegally should receive benefits paid for by the taxes of lawful residents. The measures we have now taken and the work currently in hand will see that they do not.—[*Official Report*, 24 October 1996; Vol. 284, c. 1W.]

If there was the slightest truth in the right hon. Lady's words, we should not now be facing the problems that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is trying to solve.

In addition, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) blamed my right hon. Friend for passing defective legislation. It was the right hon. and learned Gentleman who passed defective legislation and who signed up to a defective convention. All that happened was that my wicked right hon. Friend did not put right what the right hon. and learned Gentleman and David Waddington got wrong in the first place.

Far more contemptible than anything done by the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, is the approach of the Leader of the Tory party. We all know that, for too many years, it has been the practice of the Tory party to exploit racial and religious prejudice for vote-grabbing purposes, as I know from my constituency. In one election in which I stood, the Tory candidate published a leaflet intended for Muslim voters, saying that I was a Zionist, in order that my religion should deprive me of the votes of people of a different religion. My Muslim constituents were far too sensible to fall for that.

In 1978, during a by-election campaign—she did it deliberately—Margaret Thatcher, when leader of the Conservative party, said:

> People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.

The Tories were up to it then, just as they are up to it now.

The present leader of the Conservative party said that, under him, things would be different, and he wandered aimlessly and foolishly around the Notting Hill carnival, believing that such patronising and condescending activities would assure black and Asian people that the Tories were not really racialist. However, this week he has launched the local government manifesto, which talks of

> bogus asylum seekers . . . flooding into Britain.

The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) sacked Enoch Powell from the shadow Cabinet for arousing racial prejudice when Powell spoke of rivers of blood. Enoch Powell spoke of rivers; Mrs. Thatcher said "swamped"; The Conservative leader today says "flooding". They have a preoccupation with liquids in connection with immigration policy.

The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup sacked Enoch Powell from the shadow Cabinet for arousing racial prejudice. It now seems that it is a qualification for being appointed to the shadow Cabinet is to arouse racial prejudice. If Tory Members challenge my words, let me quote to them what one of their very, very few black candidates—John Taylor, who stood at Cheltenham, and who is now in the House of Lords—said on 27 September 1995. This is their man, not our man. He said:

> The Tory party think giving a few cocktail parties for Asian millionaires is race relations.

The Tories are still up to it today. The Hindujas know that they are always welcome at Conservative central office—but the Hindujas have more sense. Mr. Taylor continued by saying that the Tory party

> alienate ethnic minorities by pandering to xenophobic voters with promises of crackdowns on immigration.

That is what the Tories' man said five years ago, and it is as true today as when he said it, because it is still happening.

Three days ago, in *The Sunday Times*, Mr. Mohammed Khamisa, a Conservative activist and a Conservative councillor, wrote an article headed:

> What's black and blue and rejected all over? A Tory for 20 years, Mohammed Khamisa wants to be an MP, but the party does not seem to want him. Is race the reason, he asks.

He writes in his article:

> Having applied for the position of Conservative candidate for 13 safe and marginal seats . . . I have not even been offered an interview by any of the local Tory associations.

This is the same racist Tory party which Enoch Powell represented, which Margaret Thatcher represented, which the present Leader of the Opposition said he did not represent but which the present Leader of the Opposition is now embodying as much as any of his worst predecessors did.

The Government's record on asylum is praised by ethnic minorities in my constituency—where there is a high proportion of ethnic minorities. At every advice surgery that I hold, genuine refugees come to see me who my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has treated with generosity and humanity. At my last advice surgery, there was a little boy of 14, a Kurd, who had come to the United Kingdom across Europe last year on a false passport and had been let in to join his brother, another Iraqi Kurd.

The problems that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey mentioned can be solved in very many cases. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is good and decent and generous, and he is admired in my constituency among Libyans, Algerians, Liberians, Somalis and people of many other nationalities who owe their presence in this country to him. Major Wellington

from Sierra Leone has praised my right hon. Friend for what he has done for his family. My right hon. Friend has good policies for genuine applicants, but he is rightly wary of potentially invalid applications of the sort fostered by Azad. My Asian constituents know the difference—they really do.

The Government do not yet have a perfect record on anything, including this issue, but they do have a creditable record on asylum seekers, while the Tory party shows itself again and again in its true, nasty colours. The House should chuck out this nasty and dishonest motion.

9.15 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The last time I followed the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) in a debate on these issues was on 9 November 1999 when we considered the Government's Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Then, there was much common ground between us, but I fear that there may be less tonight.

Four weeks ago, I spent several days investigating the impact of the large number of asylum seekers in my constituency. Of course, that was not the first time that I had done that, but on this occasion I visited the two reception centres outside my constituency that are run by Kent county council. I talked to the police, the education authority, and the social services department of the county council, and I visited Dover eastern docks in the constituency of the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser). Since then, I have had further meetings on the subject.

A number of constructive suggestions emerged from those meetings. I have passed them on to the Home Secretary and I shall refer to them later in my remarks. There is no doubt that the presence of large numbers of asylum seekers in a community the size of the town of Folkestone has a considerable impact. We have, I am happy to say, so far at least—we must be cautious about such matters—avoided in my constituency the outbreaks of violence that occurred elsewhere last summer. I am proud of my constituents and of the way in which they have behaved.

There is a natural tendency in such debates to concentrate on the national statistics. We heard them from my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), so I shall not take up the House's time by repeating them. However, when I went to Dover, I was given the figures for that port. I was told that, whereas 2,142 people had applied for asylum there in 1997, the number had last year increased almost fivefold to 10,347. In addition to that, the number of clandestine entrants applying for asylum there went up tenfold, from 851 in 1997 to 8,878 in 1999.

Why has that happened? The answer is not in doubt. The Government and their apologists sometimes pretend—the Home Secretary was at it in Home Office questions on Monday—that it is all the result of forces outside their control and that there was nothing that they could do about them. If that is so, one is bound to ask: what was the point of the 1999 Act? Do they expect it to have no effect on the numbers seeking asylum in the United Kingdom? Do they expect an increase in numbers over the next three years comparable to that which has occurred over the past three years? Of course not. They hope and expect that their measures will reduce the numbers; that is the point of their legislation.

When we debated the 1999 Act on 9 November, I remarked, when I followed the right hon. Member for Gorton, on the extent to which we had, at last, established some common ground between the two main parties at least on the objective of policy in this matter. That objective is to deter undeserving applicants for political asylum, so that applicants genuinely entitled to asylum and genuinely fleeing persecution can have their claims dealt with speedily and effectively and can be given the asylum to which they are entitled.

When we introduced legislation to achieve that objective, we were accused of racism; when the Government did it, they were legislating responsibly. Never mind, we should always welcome the penitent sinner. However, penitence has been long delayed; the Government have wasted three years.

During those three wasted years, the Government have done nothing to tackle the problem. That is why such an explosive rise in numbers has occurred. Yet the Government had the means to deal with the problem; they needed only to remedy the effect of the intervention of the courts on the operation of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996.

Fiona Mactaggart: How?

Mr. Howard: I note the hon. Lady's question and I shall reply to it and the Home Secretary's point in a moment.

Before the courts intervened, the 1996 Act succeeded in bringing the problem under control. The only requirement was a short Bill, which made it clear that Parliament had never intended to place on local authorities the burdens under which they have suffered since the courts' intervention. If the Government had introduced such a measure, the Conservative party would have supported them. The remedy was at hand.

Mr. Gerrard *rose—*

Fiona Mactaggart *rose—*

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman got up first; I shall give way to him in a moment. The remedy was available, but the Government chose to do nothing for three years.

Mr. Gerrard: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman reiterate his arguments from 1996—that before their case had even been considered, people who claimed asylum should be left destitute? If he argues for that, I do not understand how any member of the Tory party can claim to uphold this country's traditions of giving sanctuary to people.

Mr. Howard: I dealt with that point fully when we considered the 1996 legislation; I shall tackle it again now. However, when the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) and the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) use words such as "starving" and "destitute", they should be aware of the effect of this Government's legislation.

As I understand it—I am sure the Home Secretary will correct me if I am wrong—anyone who has the temerity to apply for judicial review to challenge the decisions of the authorities on applications for asylum will be deprived

[Mr. Howard]

of all support. To use the language of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady, that person will be left to starve, and left destitute. I shall explain—

Mr. Gerrard: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howard: No, I am dealing with the hon. Gentleman's point, Let me explain the crucial distinction between those who apply for asylum at the port, and who would have been entitled to benefit under the 1996 Act—I do not apologise for that—and those who apply in country. When those who genuinely flee persecution and come to this country to seek sanctuary and ask for asylum arrive at the port, surely their first action is to say, "I have been persecuted. I want asylum. Will you grant it to me?"

Those who apply in country fall into very few categories: those who enter the country illegally, or those who arrive on false pretences. For example, they may claim to be visitors, and say that they have the means to support themselves and that they do not intend to apply for asylum. The Home Secretary was wrong to say that the 1996 legislation made no provision for in-country applicants to receive benefit if they applied for asylum. The legislation provided for the genuine cases.

For example, if people came from a country where circumstances had changed since their arrival in this country, they would be entitled to benefit. We therefore provided for those deserving cases. However, we told those who entered the country on the pretence of visiting, claiming that they had the means to support themselves and assuring the immigration authorities that they did not come to apply for asylum, that they could apply but that they were not entitled to financial support from the taxpayers of this country. That was the distinction that we made.

Dr. Harris: If we accept for a moment the right hon. and learned Gentleman's reason why people find themselves in that position, is he saying that the Conservative party's view is that the punishment for it should be to make asylum seekers and their families hungry and destitute?

Mr. Howard: It is not a question of punishment; it is a question of the circumstances in which taxpayers' money should be used to support people in that position. The Home Secretary says in his current legislation that taxpayers' money should not be used to support any asylum seeker who has the temerity to apply for a judicial review. We took the view that taxpayers should not be obliged to support those who do not apply for asylum at the first opportunity when they arrive in this country and who do not say, "I am fleeing persecution and I want refuge," but who enter the country on a false pretence and then expect to be supported by British taxpayers. We said that that was not acceptable.

Mr. Gerrard: On the question of whether, under present legislation, people may be destitute, I point out to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that one or two of us disagreed with the Government on that point and voted against the measures. Will he remind the House what were the relative acceptance rates for asylum claims in country and at port when he was Home Secretary? For much of that period, the rates of acceptance for in-country applicants were higher than those for applicants at port.

Mr. Howard: The rates varied a good deal at different times and that may have had more to do with the way in which the claims were dealt with than with whether or not people were genuinely fleeing persecution.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I am sure that during his time as Home Secretary the right hon. and learned Gentleman must have noticed that there were people in this country who had entered it entirely illegally, and when a terrible disaster, such as a civil war, struck their home country, they applied for asylum. Is he saying that in those circumstances, he would have argued that they too should have been left destitute?

Mr. Howard: I dealt with precisely that point, as did the legislation. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady, who is muttering from a sedentary position, is entirely wrong. The legislation expressly provided for a change in the circumstances of the country concerned, such as a revolution. Obviously, such events occur, and the legislation recognised that and provided for that. The hon. Lady is right to make that point, and we dealt with it properly and justly in the legislation.

Fiona Mactaggart: The right hon. and learned Gentleman's thesis seems to be that it is obvious to him that people came to this country because money was a draw. If that had been the case, his draconian legislation would have caused the number of people applying in country to decline to zero, but there was only a very slight decrease in that number in the period before the appeal. In this case, just as in the case of his claims about the increasing number of asylum seekers in Dover, his figures are misleading—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady's intervention is far too long. She will have to learn to make short interventions; then she will be able to get away with them.

Mr. Howard: The overall numbers declined by 40 per cent. in 1996, which was a greater decline than even I had expected. That was a tribute to the success of that legislation.

The Government have, belatedly, introduced their own legislation. As I have said before, I hope that it works, for the sake of my constituents, of genuine refugees and of the integrity of the asylum system, but I have no great confidence that it will do so. One of the curious provisions of the new arrangements, as I understand them—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong, and I may be wrong—is that if an asylum seeker applies for judicial review of an adverse decision under the Act, he loses all right to financial support.

Mrs. Roche *rose—*

Mr. Howard: Let me finish the point—then I shall be very interested in what the Minister says.

That sounds bold and draconian, but the Government have been obliged to make an exception. If the appeal is brought under section 65 of the 1999 Act, on the ground that a provision of the Human Rights Act 1998 has been infringed, financial support will continue to be available.

What is the logic of that? Why should a challenge based on the proposition that a provision of English law is being breached lead to a withdrawal of financial support, when a challenge based on the proposition that the European convention on human rights is being breached does not have the same consequence? How can the Government justify that inconsistency? I look forward to the Minister's explanation, now or in the course of her speech at the end of the debate.

That is not the only example of the trouble that the Government have stored up for themselves with the introduction of the so-called Human Rights Act 1998. However, it is an example that is likely to bring home the unforeseen consequences of that Act in a particularly conspicuous and unfortunate way.

I said earlier that I would return to the constructive suggestions that were put to me by my constituents and others last month. Some of them, which I have passed on to the Home Secretary, came from Superintendent Chris Eyre, the commander of the police district that includes both Folkestone and Dover. He put forward a number of ideas, including a proposal to improve the sharing of information about asylum seekers between other agencies and the police.

I wrote to the Home Secretary about that on 13 March, and he replied, undertaking to consider these matters. I should be grateful if the Minister told us when she winds up the debate whether any progress has been made.

More recently, I put to the Home Secretary some proposals made to me by hauliers in my constituency. They suggested that an area should be provided in Calais to which drivers could take their vehicles immediately before they embarked on the ferry, so that the vehicles could be checked there by immigration officers. They also suggested that the presence of immigration officers on board the ferries, particularly in the hold, would have a deterrent effect on the activities of asylum seekers who get into the lorries at that stage of the journey—in the hold of the ferry. I hope that the Home Secretary will give sympathetic consideration to those suggestions.

The problems that we have been debating this evening are the problems of the past three years. They are the problems, as I have demonstrated, for which the present Government are responsible. Their attempts to shuffle off the blame on to others have been wholly unconvincing. Their record deserves to be condemned.

9.32 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): I begin by reminding the House that this country has a legal responsibility under treaty to asylum seekers—all asylum seekers. Until each individual's case has been given proper consideration, it is not possible to know who is bogus and who is not.

I remind the House, too, that asylum seekers are people, with human fears, hopes and motivations. If politicians on both sides remembered that, we might in time arrive at a workable system of dealing with the challenge of the rising number of refugees and asylum seekers. Too often in the debate, on both sides, we speak about asylum seekers as though they were some sort of inanimate object—the burden, the problem, the flood or the swamp. However, they are people.

In communities like mine, asylum seekers live side by side with us and their children go to school with ours. Of course we cannot be expected to take in economic migrants outside the law, and of course we cannot be expected to take in people whose asylum cases are proved to be unfounded, but it is no coincidence that of the three Back-Bench speakers in the debate, each is the child of economic migrants.

The House would do well to remember the contribution of generations of economic migrants, whether from eastern Europe, Pakistan, the Caribbean, Somalia or Kosovo, who have contributed to making London the great international city that it is. We would have a better and more constructive debate if we put the issues in that context.

The occasion of the debate is the monumentally unscrupulous attempt by the Conservative party to use the issue of asylum to grub for votes in the forthcoming local elections. It is the tragedy of the Opposition that they have no other issue, and it is a tragedy for the parliamentary system that they form such a pathetic Opposition. It falls to a few Labour Back Benchers to do what we can to rectify the problems.

As I have said, the occasion for this debate is a monumentally unscrupulous attempt to exploit the issue of asylum. In the public mind and in political discourse, race, immigration and asylum are inextricably linked. It is totally dishonest to claim that it is possible to raise the issue of asylum, to use the big lie on asylum and to stir up people's fears on asylum, and yet not to be playing the race card. In the public mind and in public debate, the three issues are linked.

My constituency probably contains more asylum seekers per square mile than those of most Members who are present tonight. I do not claim to be naive about public fears and, in some instances, public antagonism towards asylum seekers; but, just once in a while, it falls to politicians not merely to look at the latest leader in the *Daily Mail* or the latest finding of a focus group, but to offer leadership on an issue.

Asylum is a difficult issue. I find it distressing when people who were themselves economic migrants come to my advice surgeries peddling the latest nonsense from the tabloid press about asylum. It is much easier to play that game—to play along with those fears and misapprehensions—but the right and responsible course is to discharge our responsibility as a Government as efficiently and fairly as we can, and to offer leadership in the public debate. The Conservative Opposition have failed dismally to offer the right leadership and, whether the general election takes place next summer or in the summer of 2002, they are proceeding inexorably to defeat. Trawling in the gutter for votes on the asylum issue will not help them in the long run, or even in the short run.

As I have said, this is a difficult issue, and there are practical questions to be considered. As Ministers know, I have raised those questions with them in season and out of season. I am taking a great interest in how their system of support unrolls, and in what steps they are taking to deal with the administration of the immigration and nationality directorate in Croydon.

My hon. Friends do not need to be reminded that the biggest incentive to the making of unfounded claims is delay. I fully accept that unfounded claims are a problem: indeed, I have probably seen more people who have made such claims than many other Members. Although my hon. Friends have devoted considerable energy to dealing with the problem of delay and have taken important steps in that regard, I believe that more can be done.

[Ms Diane Abbott]

During the Committee stage of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999, we were promised that the processing time for asylum claims would be reduced to two months, and that the time taken to process a claim and an appeal would be reduced to six months. I want an assurance that we are moving towards those targets. It helps no one if people must wait for years for their claims to be resolved, and it helps the communities in which they live least of all.

There are long-standing and systemic administration and management problems in Croydon. They date back to some time ago during the years of Tory government, but they still exist. The way in which Croydon is managed, the attitude of staff and some of the inefficiencies in the system repay close and continued attention. We can have the best legislation and the best intentions in the world, but the directorate in Croydon will defeat them.

Let me raise a minor point that people working in Croydon raised today. Despite all the effort that is being put into resolving cases, there is still a problem. When a case worker has made a decision on a case, that decision is passed to other staff to endorse and send out. However, because of staff shortages, there is a huge backlog of cases on which a decision has been taken, but not sent out. Colleagues will say, "How does that matter?" I will tell them: the delay in dispatching means that asylum seekers whose cases have been resolved positively cannot claim benefit, sort out their housing or whatever the need is.

I should like more detail on the staff who have been recruited in Croydon. How many specialist asylum case workers are there? How many clerical workers are there? Many of the problems in Croydon go back years and are to do with staffing, management and organisation.

As I say, I will watch with interest how the system of vouchers and forced dispersal unrolls, but I could not let the opportunity pass without expressing the concern of many people that asylum seekers who use vouchers will not receive change. That is why Oxfam is refusing to co-operate with the system. I could not let the opportunity pass without expressing the concern of many people that asylum seeker mothers will not be able to obtain toys for their children with those vouchers. I should be grateful for the Minister's reassurance on that point.

I do not doubt the good intentions of my colleagues, but forced dispersal has never worked. It did not work in relation to the Vietnamese or to the East African Asians. I wait with interest to see whether the system of forced dispersal will work in the coming months and years.

The asylum issue is emotive. In many ways, it is easy to get cheap applause in sections of the press and cheap support from members of the public on the issue. People ring my office every day to complain about their housing and what the Labour Government have not done. As the debate heightens among politicians, people are increasingly ringing my office to complain about asylum seekers. I put it to Members on both sides of the House that, when politicians take a lead in talking about asylum in a certain tone and manner, they let loose a type of debate that, in the end, is often impossible to control and is not conducive to good race relations in this country.

Many of the problems to do with the immigration and nationality directorate are quite complex and involve the organisation and management of the system. I give my hon. Friends credit for their good intentions. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is not in the Chamber to hear it, but his speech was the best that I have heard him make on the asylum issue. It put the Conservative Opposition in their place, where they belong.

The issue will not go away because it presents a challenge to many of our communities and because there are those of us in the House—the children and grandchildren of economic migrants—who will not allow a political debate to pass that takes a tone that seeks to denigrate people who are living in and contributing to our communities and who are helping to build a Britain in the 21st century that we can all be proud of.

9.43 pm

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): The debate has been good in parts. Good points have been made by hon. Members on both sides of the House, but the attempt to smear the Conservative party on the issue of asylum, particularly by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), was beneath their normal standards. *[Interruption.]*

It is important—it has always been recognised throughout the House, in all parties—that refugees who are in fear of persecution should have a safe haven in this country. They come here because they know that this country has essential freedoms and has safety under the law. During the past 100 years, people have come from across the world to this country for safety. The Conservative party was in power for 75 of those 100 years, standing up for the rights of refugees and the international obligations that we have towards refugees. *[Interruption.]* We shall therefore not take lessons from hon. Members from other parties about standing up on behalf of refugees—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Chamber is now full. Some hon. members have not heard the debate, but are shouting from a sedentary position. It is unfair that they should do that.

Mr. Heald: As other hon. Members have said, one of the United Kingdom's other strengths—apart from standing up for individual freedom—is economic freedom. Consequently, the United Kingdom is wealthy and provides social protection. Consequently, economic migrants come here looking for a better life. It is difficult to criticise them personally for that, but we are a small country and cannot afford to take every economic migrant who wants to come here. Even the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington accepted that we cannot take every economic migrant who comes here.

Every economic migrant who comes to this country and chooses to make an unfounded claim of fear of persecution damages not only the system, but the position of real refugees—those who are in fear of persecution, who want their claim to be dealt with quickly and who do not want to have to wait years for a decision, with uncertainties and delays hanging over them. It is therefore right that we should have a system that not only attempts to find the genuine refugees who are in fear of persecution and assists them, but makes it difficult for those who are economic migrants. That was the previous Government's policy.

One cannot argue with the arithmetic, which is that, in 1996—after introduction of the measures so ably described by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who had responsibility for them—the number of asylum claims decreased by 40 per cent.

What has happened since then? Although we heard a lot of sanctimonious priggishness from the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who was fiddling the figures, the trend has been clear. Since 1996, there has been a build-up in the number of applications, and ever more of them have been bogus. That is the trend. In 1998, for example, 71 per cent. of claims were refused. In 1999—because of special circumstances in Kosovo—54 per cent. of claims were refused. However, in the final quarter of 1999, 80 per cent. of applications were refused.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heald: I should like to make a bit more progress. I have very little time to sum up, because of the lengthy speech of one of the hon. Lady's colleagues.

In January 2000, 87 per cent. of claims were refused. The trend, therefore, is that ever more bogus applications are being made.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heald: No, I will not; I do not have sufficient time.

We now have a backlog of 103,000 cases. It is simply wrong to say that such an increase in applications—as we have heard, there has been a fivefold increase in Folkestone and Hythe—should be ignored and should not be treated as a crisis. This country has occasionally to face such issues, and we must speak plainly. It is ludicrous to suggest that we should not be able to call it a crisis or to say that a doubling in the number of asylum cases is not a serious matter.

Why has it happened? We have had the Government's amnesties. We have had the failure to make employment checks. We have had abolition of the safe country list. We have had the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

I should like quickly to quote to the Home Secretary comments by the Immigration Service Union—by those who have to deal with the provisions of his 1999 Act. They said:

> The proposed measures are an acknowledgement by the Home Office that it has abandoned the struggle to prevent illegal immigration—[*Official Report, Special Standing Committee*, 22 March 1999; c. 455.]

They went on to talk about some of the problems:

> the criminals who are making vast amounts of money out of bringing people here to make applications are adapting their procedures to meet what we do.

That echoes some of the points made by the right hon. Member for Gorton.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman complains about criminal racketeers. Does he therefore welcome the fact that we have impounded a lorry and are expecting a fine of £100,000 in respect of the driver bringing in 50 clandestines?

Mr. Heald: I do not welcome the fact that innocent lorry drivers are being penalised by the Home Secretary—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We do not have much time before the vote. It is not good that I keep having to intervene in the debate, but I cannot allow shouting across the Chamber.

Mr. Heald: How can the Home Secretary say that he favours human rights and then support an offence that hits the innocent and guilty alike?

We do not apologise for talking about racketeers. The Immigration Service Union, which deals with these matters, talks about those criminals—as did the right hon. Member for Gorton. We do not apologise for talking about a flood of applications if the flow becomes an inundation. The Attorney-General spoke about floods of potential asylum seekers. Everyone with any sense knows that we have to deal firmly with bogus asylum seekers. The Home Secretary himself has tabled motions in those terms in the past. Lord Janner, who is certainly no racist, has spoken about the need to deal firmly with bogus asylum seekers. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) who is not in her place, and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) have all talked about bogus asylum seekers.

We are trying to make a case that the people support—that we should be plain and frank in our language and explain what the problems are. As the Opposition, we are carrying out our constitutional duty, which is to give advice. Our advice is that the Government should put an end to the amnesties and make greater use of detention in cases involving safe countries. We believe that there should be more removals, tougher enforcement of sanctions against illegal employment and better international co-operation.

Finally, in this country we hold our freedoms dear. They include the freedom to speak our minds—free speech. I for one, and my colleagues in the Conservative party, are not prepared to be gagged by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey or anyone else.

9.53 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): That was an absolutely extraordinary speech by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald). First, he clearly was not listening when my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said that we were still operating the so-called white list. I expect that he will be in very deep trouble with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who only recently admitted that the only amnesty that there had been in this matter was under the Conservative Government. The hon. Gentleman is certainly in a bit of trouble there.

There have been some very good speeches this evening. Unfortunately, they have not come from both sides of the House. I particularly commend the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton

[Mrs. Barbara Roche]

(Mr. Kaufman). He rightly reminded us that many right hon. and hon. Members have the privilege of being in the Chamber today because of Britain's asylum system. I count myself among that group of people.

My right hon. Friend quite rightly referred to the contribution that refugees have made to this country, not only over the decades but over the centuries. Last week I had the privilege to meet about 20 refugees. They are doctors who want to give their services to this country. We have a duty to make sure that when we give people refugee status or indefinite leave to remain, we integrate them fully in our communities, where they can keep their own cultural and religious identities, and offer them that passport to make the fullest possible contribution to society.

We need to restore credibility to the system. We want a system in place whereby we honour our international obligations to those who are genuinely fleeing persecution. We want to speed their cases and ensure that people are not kept hanging around for years and years. That is essential.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) spoke about rapid decision making. We have taken on hundreds of new asylum decision makers—my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made this point—and they are there expressly to tackle the backlog of cases.

Dr. George Turner: My hon. Friend will have heard the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) call for the debate to be conducted in appropriate language and promise that he would give leadership in that. Is she aware that Susan Kramer, the Liberal Democrat candidate for mayor of London, described the voucher system as like pinning yellow stars on Jews in Nazi Germany? Does she—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to go on so long. It is unfair.

Mrs. Roche: I have seen the quotation, and as a Jewish person I take comparisons with the holocaust very seriously indeed. It is very regrettable that those comments were made.

The greatest threat to the genuine asylum seeker and advantage to the criminal facilitators who prey on vulnerable people is to have a slow system. That is why we are investing in the immigration and nationality directorate and ensuring that the 1,200 posts that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald put in place and that were lost are restored.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington rightly said that she wanted to monitor the situation closely. We will do that. I want to ensure that we have all the proper processes in place. That is very important. The record number of decisions made is a real tribute to the staff. She also asked about toys. I am grateful to her for allowing me to place on record the point that of course those who are in receipt of vouchers can use them to buy toys.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Roche: No.

There is absolutely no doubt that much of the increase in the number of clandestine illegal entrants has been organised by facilitators and criminal gangs who seek to profit from the misfortune of others—jackals preying on very vulnerable people. What do the Conservatives do? Absolutely nothing. They voted against the civil penalty. It was the only part of the legislation in which they took any interest.

We have spoken of the fines imposed and of the lorries that have been impounded. When 50 people are found in a refrigerated lorry, are we to assume that the driver does not know about it? Who are the only people in the country who are prepared to defend that practice? The Conservatives. They try to talk tough but they also try to exploit the situation.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 134, Noes 351.

Division No. 165] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John

Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mrs. Eleanor Laing.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda

Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Graham Allen and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 312, Noes 169.

Division No. 166] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin

Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Graham Allen and Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*

Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House approves the Government's comprehensive, integrated strategy to modernise the immigration and asylum system to make it fairer, faster and firmer; welcomes the provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 which will overhaul the inadequate legislative framework created by the previous Government and will replace the chaotic asylum support arrangements introduced in 1996 which have imposed an intolerable burden on local authorities; is astonished that the Official Opposition voted in the other place to restore cash benefits to asylum seekers at a cost of £500 million per year; approves the measures being taken to tackle the smugglers and traffickers who profit from illegal immigration; approves the new civil penalty for drivers and others who bring illegal immigrants to this country concealed in their vehicles; welcomes the substantial additional investment that the Government is making to increase the volume and speed of asylum decisions; congratulates the staff of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate on achieving record numbers of asylum decisions; and supports the Government's commitment to protecting genuine refugees while dealing firmly with those who seek to evade the control.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration (Leave to Enter and Remain) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 30th March, be approved.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

The House divided: Ayes 323, Noes 125.

Division No. 167] **[10.28 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livsey, Richard

Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Graham Allen.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and Mr. Keith Simpson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

PETITION

Village Post Offices

10.39 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The petition that I am presenting this evening is in the name of Thelma Budd of 9 Morgan quay, Teignmouth, Devon. It is signed by Mrs. Budd and a number of other members of the Teignmouth Townswomen's Guild, and it is to ask that the House of Commons urge Her Majesty's Government not to carry through their proposals for automated credit transfer, given the threat that that poses to village post offices. The petition ends in the usual way.

To lie upon the Table.

Bail Hostels

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

10.40 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): May I make it clear that I raise this issue in my capacity as the Member for Maidstone and The Weald and not in my capacity as a shadow Home Office Minister? It is necessary to say that, because some of the points that I shall make will touch on Home Office matters.

I thank the Minister of State, Home Office for being present, but he has drawn the short straw. Perhaps the Secretary of State for Social Security should have answered this debate. For rather obvious reasons, my speech will be a third of the length that I originally intended, and I hope that the Minister will not interpret that as a discourtesy.

I raise the subject because there is a bail hostel in my constituency. It suffers much from the fact that different rules appear to be applied by the Home Office and the Department of Social Security. I first become interested in the issue through a case that I raised with the Home Secretary in which a foreign national had been charged with a crime and remanded not in custody, but on bail. Unfortunately, the foreign national had no means of support and could not work because she had been tagged. That effectively restricted her during the hours that she was most likely to have been able to work. Residence at the bail hostel rather than anywhere else in the community, such as with friends, was a condition of her bail, but she could not obtain support while there.

The Home Secretary told me that the person concerned could not be evicted from the hostel for failure to pay rent but only for a breach of her bail conditions. However, in the same paragraph, he added that the bail hostel was entitled to make the payment of rent one of those conditions. If she did not pay it, she would be in breach of her conditions. She was therefore trapped by a very theoretical protection that did not, in fact, exist. Because she could not satisfy the habitual residence test, she could not obtain social security.

When I raised the case, I was approached by Kent probation and told about other anomalies that apply to bail hostels. For example, a disabled British resident with multiple sclerosis and in a wheelchair was refused disability living allowance on the ground that he was in custody and that the Department of Social Security regarded bail hostels as custody. However, according to the Home Secretary, bail hostels are not custody; they are alternatives to custody. Once again, there is an absence of joined-up government, and I do not say that to sneer, because many of the rules grew up under successive Governments and over a long time. They now contradict each other and urgently need sorting out.

The other issue that arose was rehousing from bail hostels. The Minister will be aware that one of the biggest factors in the prevention of reoffending is the ability to house people in stable accommodation. However, local authorities are unwilling to rehouse people from bail hostels and to count those evicted from such hostels as homeless within their territory particularly if they originated from elsewhere before they committed the crime.

I have several questions for the Minister. What are overseas embassies doing about foreign nationals who come here, break our laws and then turn to us for support that we do not give? We are, more or less, obliged to return such people to custody and that costs vastly more than remanding them on bail. Surely foreign embassies should take some responsibility for their nationals who are in that position. What are the costs of custody as opposed to keeping someone in a bail hostel? Is it not worth sorting the problem out for that aspect alone? Would it be possible to bill other Governments for any extra expenses incurred?

What is the position of British nationals in other European Union countries who encounter the same problem? Does it arise? If so, what is our attitude? If a foreign national—or anybody else—who is committed to a bail hostel has also been tagged, can the restrictions take some account of that and allow some hours for that person to find work?

10.45 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): I thank the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) for raising important issues and I commend her on her fortitude in persevering with the debate while obviously suffering from laryngitis.

The right hon. Lady has written to my right hon. Friend about anxieties raised by a member of staff at Fleming house, which is an approved hostel in her constituency. The staff were worried about two residents who were foreign nationals. I understand that, because the residents did not fulfil the habitual residence test as set out in Department of Social Security rules, they did not receive any financial support from the Benefits Agency. That meant that the two residents were unable to pay the usual maintenance charge that all residents in approved probation and bail hostels should pay.

I want to stress at the outset that, as the right hon. Lady acknowledged, the bulk of her anxieties belong in the bailiwick and come under the remit of the Department of Social Security. I shall draw the matters that she has raised to that Department's attention, and ensure that she receives a written response.

There has been a recent change, about which the right hon. Lady may not yet know. From 3 April this year, housing benefit is no longer payable for approved probation and bail hostel charges. The Home Office has taken over responsibility for paying the element of the charge that would previously have qualified for housing benefit. That will join up at least some of her points.

If the cases of the right hon. Lady's two constituents had arisen after 3 April, they would have been tackled differently. Housing benefit would have been irrelevant because the Home Office now funds the hostels directly on the basis of a grant that is calculated on their occupancy rates. That has contributed greatly to solving the dilemma that several hostels faced.

There was always a concern that foreign nationals in the hostels would, through no fault of their own, be at risk of breaching the conditions of their residence and taken back to court. There was also a perceived disincentive to hostels to take on such foreign nationals, even though public protection and the best interests of the administration of justice demanded it. The change that occurred on 3 April has removed that supposed disincentive.

We are committed to the role of approved probation and bail hostels. They operate under the Approved Bail and Probation Hostel Rules 1995. As the right hon. Lady acknowledged, the problems originate in the actions of successive Governments. Nevertheless, they need to be tackled, and we intend to do that.

Placement in an approved hostel is intended to provide enhanced residential supervision in the community through a supportive and structured environment. The work of approved probation and bail hostels is often not sufficiently appreciated by the wider public or, indeed, by some in the profession itself.

Miss Widdecombe *indicated assent.*

Mr. Boateng: I am glad that the right hon. Lady agrees, and that Members on both sides of the House are able to signify our appreciation of hostels' work.

Hostels are also intended to be a base from which residents can take full advantage of the community facilities for work, education, training, treatment and recreation. The right hon. Lady raised an important point about her example of a foreign national who, because she was tagged, was unable to work while living in a hostel and therefore had difficulty in making a contribution to the costs.

I have considered the matter, with the benefit of advice from the Department of Social Security, and I am told that existing jobseeker's allowance rules are sufficiently flexible to allow the vast majority of prisoners released under home detention curfew to meet labour market conditions. The conditions of being available for and actively seeking work, which are attached to the benefit, are considered on a case by case basis. European Union nationals are also in a more privileged position to gain access to work and to some benefits.

The right hon. Lady asked me about the position of our nationals in EU jurisdictions, and I shall take advice on that and write to her. We know that, where we have reciprocal arrangements with the country of origin of foreign nationals, it is possible for them to be repatriated during their period of home detention curfew and they can then be supervised in their own country for that part of their sentence, which they would otherwise have served in hostel accommodation on licence.

Miss Widdecombe: Although what the Minister said about people who have a tagging sentence is valuable, my point was more about people who are pre-trial and have to keep to their bail hostel during certain hours.

Mr. Boateng: That certainly is more problematic, because the hours during which those people may be required to remain in the hostel can make it difficult for them to find employment or to continue with their usual work. It is certainly worth our while, as a society, seeking to ensure not only that our arrangements enable sentencers to be aware of the implications of their conditions for an individual's employability and capacity to take up benefit from a hostel place, but that the conditions are sufficiently flexible to enable the individual to take up employment. I shall certainly look into the matter raised by the right hon. Lady.

[Mr. Boateng]

The right hon. Lady also asked me about the attitude of embassies and high commissions. My experience, which is probably similar to hers, is that attitudes vary from country to country, from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and sometimes even from official to official within a particular mission over time. Some seem more understanding and more helpful than others.

My immediate answer to the right hon. Lady's question, then, is that the attitude varies, but in the main, overseas missions take a similar view to ours. If people offend overseas, their first port of call for financial assistance ought not to be their consulate. They should use their own resources. For good and understandable reasons, although consular officials overseas endeavour to be as helpful as they can, they try to do so with a close eye on the public purse, and on the need for people to bear responsibility for their own acts.

Nevertheless, it is important that foreign nationals in that position should be able to receive authoritative advice from the probation service or through-care prison officers about the likely attitude of their consular mission. I shall pursue the matter with the probation and through-care authorities in the Prison Service and explore the possibilities of our doing more in that area, and write to the right hon. Lady.

We want to ensure that the relatively small number of foreign nationals in bail hostels and approved probation hostels should not be disadvantaged by the fact that they are foreign nationals, and that the hostels should not bear an unreasonable burden as a result of the fact that there are foreign nationals among the people for whom they are responsible. We believe that with regard to housing benefit, foreign nationals resident in such hostels will no longer experience a financial shortfall to the extent that was possible before 3 April.

I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for enabling me to clarify, as far as I can tonight, the questions that she raised. It has been a short but useful debate, and I will ensure that the Department of Social Security responds directly to her by letter on the detailed points that more properly fall to that Department. I thank her for bringing the matter before the House, and wish her a speedy recovery.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 13 April 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Thursday 4 May.

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MEDWAY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Orders for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 4 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

BSE

1. **Mr. Nigel Beard** (Bexleyheath and Crayford): What has been the cost to the Exchequer of the BSE crisis. [117722]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): BSE has been a national tragedy. To date, 53 people have lost their lives to new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. The Government have put in place powerful public protection measures, which have incurred costs on the livestock industry and on the Exchequer.

Total expenditure on the BSE crisis is estimated to be £4.2 billion to the end of the financial year 2001–02. Of that amount, the other European Union member states contribute about £487 million—11.6 per cent. of the total cost—when the Fontainebleau mechanism is taken into account. Therefore, the net cost of the crisis to the Exchequer to the end of the next financial year is about £3.7 billion.

Mr. Beard: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the £4 billion, the 53 people who have died, the uncountable cost and the plight that the farming industry has been left in, are the dimensions of a major national disaster, which is an indictment of the Government who presided over it? Does he further agree that the best way to safeguard against such disasters is to have a constant science-based review of food standards? Is it not therefore amazing that, throughout the 1990s, the research and development budget for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food declined by about 30 per cent? Can he give the House an assurance that the Ministry is better prepared for any such emergency?

Mr. Brown: The creation of the Food Standards Agency will go a long way towards providing the British public with the protection that they have a right to expect. It is right that public money be expended in that way to protect the public on the precautionary principle. Those measures are very expensive, but the tragedy against which we are protecting the public cannot be calculated in money alone. Our hearts go out to those people and their families—those who have lost their lives and the families that remain.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I think that the Minister accepts that there has been a huge on-cost to the pig industry as a result of the BSE regulations. Why then do his Government refuse to compensate the industry for it? Does he appreciate how serious the position is? The industry has been losing money for two years. The help that, we understand, is available from the European Community has not been forthcoming because of Government inaction.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is mistaken. The constraints that were put on the use of meat and bonemeal in the pig industry were imposed in 1996 under the Government whom he supported. Had the Government then decided to approach the European Union with a view to covering some of those costs, the Commission may have been sympathetic, but we certainly could not make such an approach now because the Commission has said that economic considerations are the only reason offered for changing the position in the United Kingdom. When I had an exchange with the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who speaks for the Opposition, he made it clear that the Opposition were seeking such a change for economic reasons, which is precisely why the Commission will not allow it.

The Commission is willing to explore with us a restructuring proposal, which costs public money. We are taking that forward following the Prime Minister's summit, so there is support for the industry, which was not available under the previous Government, but we must explore the matter with the Commission. I hope to have more to say in a matter of weeks.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Should not my right hon. Friend be much tougher in laying the blame where it belongs—on the former Government—for what has been one of the most appalling tragedies? There has been not only the £4 billion cost, but the great tragedy for the families involved as a result of the new variant CJD cases, and the tragic implications for farmers and those in the meat industry who have additional costs that cannot be fully estimated. Will he give a full assurance that the Government will always put public safety first? Is that not why we have created the Food Standards Agency, which will be vital in the years ahead?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right in what he says about the FSA. The Government's first priority is to protect the public. All other considerations, although

important, are secondary to that. As for where responsibility lies, I should like to withhold my judgment until we see the report of the BSE inquiry committee.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): How closely is the Minister keeping up with the research work by Professor Ebringer of London on that matter? Does he accept that, if Professor Ebringer's theories are right—he questions the prion theory—it would have had a significant impact on lowering the cost of handling the BSE crisis? Can he give any indication of how that research is going?

Mr. Brown: There are several alternative theories in the scientific community to the prion protein theory. I try to keep as close as I can to the scientific debate and to question the scientific advisers who make recommendations on Government policy. Although there is no absolute certainty in the matter—I guess that there never can be in matters of scientific debate—nevertheless, I find the prion protein theory pretty compelling.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it needs saying over and over again that that £4.2 billion and the loss of life involved is down to the previous Tory Government? It is a savage indictment of what they did. They ought to be made to pay—I do not know whether Lord Belize of Sleaze has any money. If they had been in local government, not only would they have been kicked out of office, they would have been made to find that money. Their silence explains everything.

Mr. Brown: I think that the Conservative party has a cheek offering advice to the Government on the issue given that it presided over the circumstances that brought about this national tragedy. However, I also think that we should wait until we see the report of the BSE inquiry before coming to a conclusion.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Does the Minister recognise that Europe is threatened with a new BSE crisis that results directly from the refusal of the French Government to acknowledge the extent of under-reporting of BSE in France? In view of the growing evidence of that under-reporting, why are Labour Ministers so reluctant to protect British consumers against potentially dangerous imports from France, such as gelatine?

Mr. Brown: That is all complete nonsense. The fact is that we do not allow meat products over 30 months to be imported into this country. We parallel in our imports the powerful public protection measures that we have in place in the United Kingdom. Trying to get up a food scare against the French is no substitute for Conservative Front Benchers apologising for the food crisis over which they presided when they were the Government.

Pet Travel Scheme

2. **Mrs. Maria Fyfe** (Glasgow, Maryhill): What action he has taken to ensure that pet owners are aware of the operation of the pet travel scheme. [117723]

5. **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): How many animals have entered the United Kingdom under the pet travel scheme. [117731]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Pet owners have been informed about the pet travel scheme—PETS—in a variety of ways, including advertisements in the daily press. Every veterinary practice has been sent information, including factsheets and posters. Information and advice are available also from the PETS helpline or by e-mail or fax, or from the PETS website which receives more than 500,000 hits each month. In the first six weeks of the pet travel scheme pilot, 857 dogs and cats have entered the UK without going into quarantine.

Mrs. Fyfe: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, and assure her that many of my constituents who campaigned for sensible reform are delighted that it is now in operation. Could she say what action the Government are taking to ensure that publicity clearly informs pet owners of the requirement for pets to pass strict health standards to ensure that Britain remains free of rabies, and to avoid any disappointment and upset to pet owners?

Ms Quin: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. The purpose of the pet travel scheme is in no way to relax our controls on rabies or other diseases, but simply to reform so that the misery of quarantine is ended. I am glad that that objective has been widely recognised and approved. The publicity measures for the scheme seem to be working. Surveys that we have conducted show that there is both a high level of awareness of the scheme among pet owners, and the necessary level of awareness among veterinarians both in the United Kingdom and abroad.

Mr. Crausby: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. Will she confirm that the pet travel scheme has been successfully established much earlier than anyone could possibly have hoped for, and that it has been a godsend to numerous pet owners who no longer need to quarantine their pets? Is she aware that the scheme will mean a great deal to hundreds, and eventually thousands, of people—especially those who serve in our armed forces—not to mention their pets?

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend is right, and I am delighted that the Government have delivered on our commitment so early by introducing the pilot scheme. Obviously, it will be important to examine the effects of the scheme before we introduce the main scheme that will follow.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): As one who supports and has campaigned for such a scheme, I am aware that, when it was introduced, concern was expressed about the lack of information available to veterinary surgeons and particularly about information relating to veterinary services in France that would be required for people returning to the UK. Can the Minister satisfy the House that veterinary surgeons can provide advice to travellers so that, with the holiday season starting, the many people who wish to bring animals back to the UK do not find that they cannot obtain the veterinary services that they require? In addition, when will the British forces serving in the rabies-free island of Cyprus be included in the scheme?

Ms Quin: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's general comments, and I know that he has been in contact with my noble Friend Baroness Hayman, who leads for the Ministry on the issue in another place. We are in touch with the French vets, whose organisation rejoices in the acronym of SNVEL. We are ensuring that they have the requisite information on necessary certification. We have been in contact—via the French authorities—with French local government, and I am glad that French town halls are making the information available. We hope that problems can be averted in time for the summer season.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Minister has rightly emphasised that this is only a pilot scheme. Will she confirm that the advance to a full-blown scheme is by no means inevitable, and that it would happen only if the Minister were absolutely satisfied that every condition of the pilot scheme had been fulfilled? Will she assure us that she and her officials will want to be satisfied that facilities overseas in all countries from which animals might be brought to this country fully comply with the requirements set out when the pilot scheme was set up?

Ms Quin: I sense that the right hon. Gentleman is less enthusiastic about the scheme than some of his Conservative colleagues. Not for the first time, he finds himself in an odd position regarding a policy issue. We believe that the scheme is worth while, and the early indications are that it is capable of working well and, as I said earlier, ending the misery of quarantine. However, I assure him that the scheme is being monitored carefully, and if we are to extend it to other countries, we must be sure that it works well.

In response to a point raised by the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) which I did not answer, we are keen to ensure that other rabies-free areas, such as the island of Cyprus, can be included in the scheme. I cannot give a 100 per cent. guarantee today, but it is likely to be included in the main scheme.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): This is an excellent scheme but—to return to the question put by the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale)—will someone check during the monitoring process on what is happening in northern France in terms of the prices being charged by veterinaries to bring into order the documentation required for the return of animals to the UK, as there is a danger of exploitation in that market?

Ms Quin: I will draw my hon. Friend's comments to the attention of my noble Friend Baroness Hayman. We will pursue the issues with the French veterinary authorities. We do not want any financial exploitation as a result of the scheme. However, he will be well aware that the costs of quarantine were enormous and that in addition to the benefits of the scheme generally, it helps to reduce costs considerably.

Common Fisheries Policy

3. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in the European Union on the reform of the common fisheries policy. [117725]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I have regular discussions with my counterparts in the European Union about reform of the CFP and other fisheries matters. This week, for example, I visited the Netherlands for cordial and constructive discussions with my Dutch opposite number.

Mr. George: Does the Minister agree that, if devolved regional management of fishing effort is to succeed, as we want it to, it must proceed on the basis of trust, particularly between the Ministry and the industry? How can he explain the situation whereby the Belgians have been given 200 tonnes of UK plaice and sole quota to persuade them to stay out of the Irish sea closed area? Had not he assured the industry that there was a gentlemen's agreement?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman's point about relations between member states is important. It is not unusual for member states to help each other with quota management. It is certainly true that we made an allocation to Belgium, in response to the good will and support that we have received from Belgium, which removed its beam trawlers from the closed area—which it did not have to do—and thereby influenced the Dutch and the Irish Republic. Our own beam trawlers were the first to volunteer to come out.

The Belgian Government have assisted us with quota in the past. They helped us to keep the channel cod fishery open for our inshore fleet in 1998 and they helped us to clear some end-of-year overfishes that would otherwise have meant that our quota would have been deducted. That is what European co-operation is all about. The Belgians have removed their vessels from the area and no British fisherman will suffer as a consequence, because we had an undershoot in our quota. I can guarantee that no one in Britain will lose quota as a result of the deal.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): There is not a cat in hell's chance of the French and Spanish Governments agreeing to the comprehensive reform of the common fisheries policy. If I were a French or Spanish Member of Parliament, I would argue against any reform of the CFP. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend must continue to argue the case for both regional management and the abolition of industrial fishing. Both subjects should be on the agenda of the next meeting of the British-Irish Council, notwithstanding the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Our fishing associations have had talks with the French and Spanish on regional management. Unfortunately, some in our industry and in the Conservative party give the impression that when we talk about regional management we are talking about renationalising the common fisheries policy. That is not possible without withdrawing from the European Union. If that is Conservative Members' policy, they should say so. I believe that, through negotiation and co-operation, we can move towards a less centralised CFP, more regional management and more involvement of local fishing industries in managing local fisheries.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): We have heard about the 200 tonnes that were allowed to Belgium. Is there a similar arrangement with the Dutch and the Irish and, if so, for what tonnage?

Mr. Morley: No, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there has been no arrangement with the Dutch and the Irish. This is an issue of member states assisting each other. It is a two-way process, and we have benefited from assistance from other countries, including Belgium. We have shown good will in recognition of the good will that has been shown to us.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): My hon. Friend is well aware that the Fleetwood inshore fleet is very concerned about the closure of the Irish sea and the allocation of quota to the Belgians. The fishermen feel especially angry because they were not properly consulted. In his debates with his colleagues about the reform of the CFP, will he ensure that the fishermen's voice is heard and that their sensible suggestions about fish management are taken into account? Simply relying on quotas has clearly not worked.

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend has campaigned strongly on behalf of her fishermen and I recognise the problems. That is why we are allowing the inshore fishermen to fish with our scientists on board so that they can examine the case for continuing to fish without impacting on cod. On quotas, we have got the beam trawlers out of the cod closed area, which her fishermen were keen to see. When it comes to the allocation of quotas, it would be helpful if the industry could speak with one voice, because that is not the case at present.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Following the question from the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George), in a recent written answer to me the Minister confirmed that a voluntary agreement had been reached with the Belgians to withdraw their flat fish beam trawlers from the cod protection zone in the north Irish sea. It has now come to light that that was no ordinary voluntary agreement but involved a "bung"—as *Fishing News* described it—of extra quota of 190 tonnes of North sea plaice and 10 tonnes of valuable Dover sole from the English channel. What authority does the Minister have for dishing out extra quota in that way, without consultation and in secret? Will he reiterate his guarantee that no UK fishermen will lose out as a result of that bribe to the Belgians? How does he reconcile those actions with his shameful treatment of the Fleetwood inshore fishermen who have had no income for two months because of his failure to pay them rightful compensation?

Mr. Morley: When the Belgians helped us to keep the channel cod fishery open, we did not describe that as a bung or a bribe. I repeat that we have a voluntary agreement with them. We have recognised the good will that has been shown to us by Belgium and other countries. The fish come from an undershoot. The allocation of both plaice and sole in the North sea for this year is more than was caught by our fishermen last year. I give a guarantee in relation to plaice that no British fisherman will suffer as a result of that arrangement.

Dairy Farmers

4. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on the prospects for dairy farmers. [117727]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Dairy farmers will have welcomed the announcement on 30 March, the more so given current difficulties in the sector. They will receive some £22 million in agrimonetary compensation, which is the maximum we could draw down. We have lifted dairy hygiene charges at a cost of a further £1 million a year, and dairy farmers will also benefit from the changes we are seeking to the over-30-months scheme weight limit.

Other positive factors in the sector are the approach taken by the successors to Milk Marque and the forthcoming generic promotion of milk that will be undertaken by the Milk Development Council.

Mr. Paterson: Ten to 12 dairy farmers in my area apply to get out of farming every week by trying to sell their quotas. That is partly because of the Government's bungled negotiation with the European Union, which deprived my farmers of a market for bull calves in France, where they are worth £150, so that they have to send them to hunt kennels for humane slaughter for nothing. What will the Government do to take responsibility for that, having arbitrarily deprived Britain's farmers of a viable market for bull calves?

Mr. Brown: That is complete nonsense. Instead of misrepresenting the position in the House of Commons, the hon. Gentleman should explain to his constituents what the Government are doing to help the dairy sector.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): One cannot underestimate the problems in the dairy industry with ridiculously low pricing. That is a legacy of crazy economics and, dare I say, an absurd structure. Will my right hon. Friend do what he can to encourage greater collaboration and co-operation in the sector so that we can have an effective dairy industry that can achieve things locally and internationally?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is on to the right point. The 1992 changes in the structure of the dairy industry introduced by the then Conservative Government led to an adversarial casting of the supply chain in the industry, which haunts it to this day. I do what I can to draw the supply chain together, because the ultimate answer to dairy farmers' problems lies in the market place and in securing a premium from the working of the supply chain.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Can the Minister clarify the situation as regards his discussions with the European Union on the over-30-months scheme? Is he negotiating for removal or raising of the weight limit? Is that matter on the agenda for tomorrow's beef management committee meeting?

Mr. Brown: Discussions are under way with Commission officials. I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman which management committee will deal with the changes that we are seeking as that is still a matter for discussion. The costs of the change that the Government propose will

fall wholly on the domestic taxpayer, so no EU money is involved. As to whether the Government's proposal is to lift the limit or increase it, it is to lift it.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): May I welcome the announcement of the agrimonetary compensation—the £22 million that has been secured? It is £22 million that was never secured by the previous Conservative Government. The removal of the dairy hygiene charges will also be welcomed in my constituency. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is necessary to work with the supermarket chains to ensure a fair market for farmers and to ensure a more realistic level for the price of milk so that some farmers who are facing great difficulties can have a secure future?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend summarises the position well. He is right to point out that the previous Conservative Government never paid out a penny in agrimonetary compensation, although the Conservatives have called on me to pay it out. For the avoidance of doubt, with your indulgence, Madam Speaker, I should make it clear to those on the Liberal Democrat Front Bench that when I said that the Government intended to lift the weight limit I meant that they intend to remove it, as I can see that they are discussing the matter.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Potentially far more important than the immediate amount of cash made available in the package of a fortnight ago is the possible change in attitude towards the way in which the regulatory regimes and the costs are applied. With that in view, have the Government now abandoned the policy of full economic cost recovery for inspections and the way in which the regime is applied to farmers?

Mr. Brown: As the right hon. Gentleman will know because he follows these matters closely, the Government are carrying a considerable amount in charges that could have fallen on the industry—not only the charges that I mentioned in an earlier answer, but the cattle passport charges, which are carried by the taxpayer and not the industry.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Is the Minister aware of how pleased my dairy farmers in Staffordshire are that the area has been identified as a hot spot for the badger culling trials? He will be aware that the area has been plagued by a massive increase in bovine tuberculosis, which has hit many dairy farmers hard. Can he say whether the Minister responsible in the other place will soon visit my constituency to enter discussions with dairy farmers?

Mr. Brown: The Government remain committed to the Krebs-Bourne trials. We are determined to see them through. I am pleased that we have been able to announce the additional matched triplets, which will be a reassurance to dairy farmers. The Government are determined to do everything that they can to combat bovine TB. I am sorry that I cannot say anything about the movements of the Minister in another place, but I hope that my hon. Friend will receive a ministerial visit soon.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): How can the Minister talk about dairy farmers getting more out of the marketplace after the Government's incompetent handling of the Milk Marque issue, which has caused the fragmentation of farmers' market position? Does he accept that the waiving of the hygiene charges that he trumpeted will equal £30 or £40 to the average dairy farmer, which is not exactly a life saver? Does he not understand the crisis in the industry? As my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) said, dairy farmers are going out of business in droves. Is it not clear that soon the only source of bullshit will be Downing street? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. That comment seemed to me and to the House to be unwarranted. It is unacceptable to me and from what I see it is also unacceptable to hon. Members. I hope that we shall employ higher standards in our exchanges and I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw those remarks.

Mr. Paice: At your behest, Madam Speaker, of course I withdraw that particular word. I will replace it with "bovine verbal excrement" from Downing street.

Mr. Brown: I will not comment on the standards of parliamentary debate from the Conservative Front Bench, except to observe that its occupants have nothing to contribute to the debate but bad language.

Livestock Farming (Northumberland)

6. **Mr. A. J. Beith** (Berwick-upon-Tweed): What recent assessment he has made of the state of livestock farming in Northumberland. [117733]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): We recognise the problems of the livestock industry in Northumberland and the rest of the country. We have acted to alleviate them. On 30 March, my right hon. Friend the Minister announced a substantial package of £200 million, the bulk of which was targeted at the livestock sector.

Mr. Beith: The summit measures were indeed welcomed, but does the Minister of State recognise that deeply indebted livestock farmers in Northumberland are still struggling, particularly with the problems of the high pound? Is that featuring in discussions among Ministers? Does the hon. Lady recognise that as soon as the livestock prices at the marts rise, Republic of Ireland stock comes in to undercut the United Kingdom trade? Does she also recognise that the dairy farming sector—what little we have left of it—is still in a very desperate position?

Ms Quin: The right hon. Gentleman is correct about the difficulties of the dairy sector. That is why it was an important focus of the farming summit that took place on 30 March. Besides the agrimonetary payments for dairy farmers that were announced, the hygiene charges and the over-30-months scheme limit were removed. Those points had been put strongly by dairy farmers in recent months, and the right hon. Gentleman must recognise that we responded to them.

The farming summit must be considered against the background of previous help that we have given the industry. Together with the food chain initiative, also

announced at the farming summit, there are many measures that should at least reassure dairy farmers that we are very focused on their situation.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): One of the things that the Minister can do to help Northumbrian livestock farmers is to revisit the extraordinarily complicated rules that surround the Agenda 2000 extensification scheme. This involves more than six farm visits a year and, what is worse, perpetuates the evil that farmers are raising beef for subsidy, not for meat quality.

Ms Quin: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to complications in the scheme. However, in our contacts with the European Commission we have done a lot to try to bring about greater simplification. The Government have set up a review of regulatory burdens, and accepted the vast majority of the recommendations of the meat industry red tape working group. Some of them require further negotiations with the European Commission, which we are pursuing, but we are bringing in those which we are able to introduce domestically.

Pig Industry

7. **Mr. David Tredinnick** (Bosworth): What discussion he has had recently with representatives of the pig industry about pig farming; and if he will make a statement. [117737]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): On 30 March, my right hon. Friend the Minister attended the Prime Minister's meeting with leaders of the agriculture and food industries. As part of the action plan that came out of that meeting, the Government are offering pig producers £26 million this year to help them restructure their industry and restore long-term viability. We are working to provide further funding in future years. Our plans have been notified to the EU Commission to meet state aid rules.

We have also deferred implementation of integrated pollution prevention and control until 2007 for pig and poultry installations, and the pig industry has also benefited substantially from marketing grants under the agriculture developments scheme 1999.

Mr. Tredinnick: Is the Minister aware that the chairman of the National Pig Association has written to me saying that the money falls far short of the twin objectives of reducing the impact of the BSE tax and returning the industry to profitability? Given what is going on at Stoke Golding in my constituency, where the Goslings have a very big farm of 40 sows which live in straw conditions that meet very high standards, does he understand that it is uncompetitiveness, caused by the higher standards in this country, that is causing so much difficulty? Will he stop illegal imports of products that do not meet the very high standards that we require?

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend the Minister has already outlined some of the action taken in relation to the pig industry. On labelling, the verification officer appointed by the Ministry has assisted in getting three retail chains to change their labelling to reflect more accurately the country of origin of meat.

I meet the chairman of the National Pig Association regularly. Although the association naturally wants us to go further on certain matters, I have seen correspondence in which it was very supportive and thanked the Government for introducing measures to help the industry.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Farmers in my constituency very much welcome the additional money recently announced for the pig industry. Bernard Howard is a local pig farmer, and for the first time he has given us a pat on the back—in my constituency, that is a miracle. However, the BSE-related costs to the pig industry are a worry. Will my hon. Friend confirm that help with those costs would be illegal under European Commission rules, and that that is why the Government cannot help the pig industry in that way?

If I invited my right hon. Friend the Minister to my constituency, would he be prepared to meet farmers in Corby and east Northamptonshire, and in Kettering and Wellingborough too, who have severe problems? They would really welcome the opportunity to meet my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Morley: As my right hon. Friend has made clear, the previous Administration provided no assistance when BSE-related costs were introduced in 1996. Moreover, the present Opposition have made it clear that they want that support for economic reasons, even though providing it would be impossible as it would amount to illegal state aid. The pig industry is well aware of how difficult it has been to put together an assistance package while meeting the state aid rules. We have managed to put such a package together, and we have helped industry in a number of ways. My hon. Friend is right to say that most people in the pig industry recognise that the Government have done a great deal to assist them with their present problems.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The £26 million package for the pig industry is derisory, although it is not nearly as bad as the one tenth of a penny per litre on offer to the milk industry. The Minister has said that the money is to be used for restructuring the pig industry. Will he explain what that means?

Mr. Morley: It is interesting that although Conservative Members are keen to call figures derisory, no money was forthcoming from the Conservative Government when there were similar problems in 1996. We have put forward a range of measures to help the pig industry in a number of ways. Restructuring is only part of the package, which includes assistance to help those who want to stay in the industry, so that they can become competitive and meet the demands made on them.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Ministers have so far failed to answer any of the questions that I tabled 10 days ago about the details of the action plan announced a fortnight ago. The Minister keeps boasting about the £26 million, but is not it the case that that money can be spent only on getting pig farmers out of business and on ensuring that the land that they use is not used for pig farming? Does the Minister understand that the pig industry needed measures to help to keep farmers in business while the price recovered? Will not the direct

consequence of what the Ministry has done be that more of the pigmeat consumed in this country comes from imports, much of which will be produced by farmers who fail to meet the standards required by law in Britain?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Gentleman is simply wrong. The package has three elements. They have been published, and I understand, too, that the hon. Gentleman's written questions have been answered. One of the elements of the package will assist people staying in the industry in a number of ways. For example, pig farmers have benefited substantially from the agricultural development grants. We are helping the people who want to leave the industry, but we are also helping those who want to stay in, so that they can improve their businesses and make them successful.

Co-operative Working

8. **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): What steps he is taking to improve co-operative working across the agri-food chain. [117738]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The Government are working in many ways, including in partnership with the industry, to improve levels of co-operation across the food chain. This approach was evident at the recent agriculture summit, when the industry committed itself to developing a code of best practice on trading relationships.

Mr. Savidge: Does the Minister believe that the agreements reached at that summit, not only on the code of best practice but on the clear labelling of superior British produce, will be of vital assistance to the food industry in my area of the north-east of Scotland and throughout Britain?

Ms Quin: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend is right. Although it was important that at the summit there was a commitment to the code of practice, equally welcome was the boost given to better and more visible labelling by the National Farmers Union kitemark, which I hope will be successful. It seems that consumers are aware already that this is an important initiative, and the level of recognition of the scheme is already quite high.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

European Convention on Human Rights

21. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): If he will make a statement on United Kingdom compliance with the European convention on human rights in relation to legislation. [117752]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The United Kingdom ratified the European convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in 1951, and is bound in international law to respect and observe convention rights.

Section 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998 provides for a statement of compatibility from Ministers introducing legislation into Parliament. That is already in force. It requires that when legislation is introduced in either House for a Second Reading, the Minister responsible for the legislation must make a written statement that he or she considers the Bill to be compatible with convention rights, or is unable to make the statement but wishes Parliament to proceed with the Bill anyway. It is primarily for the Minister who is responsible for a Bill to ensure that the provisions are compatible. On reaching a view on these matters, the Minister would act on the advice of his or her officials and legal advisers, and sometimes the Law Officers become involved.

Mr. Mackinlay: Is it not time that we revisited section 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998? It is inadequate, and will lead to embarrassment for the United Kingdom and to work for the Law Officers, who will have to defend our statute book in the European Court and other courts. Did my hon. and learned Friend notice this week that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was unable to give a human rights compliance notice in relation to the Local Government Bill? On the advice of the Lord Chancellor, he is unable to explain why he is not able to give that notice. It is nonsense. Private Members' Bills and private Bills are passing through the House, and with them there is apparently no need for human rights compliance certification. Again, that is nonsense. When these measures reach the statute book, the Law Officers will sometimes have to defend the indefensible. We should recognise that we are being sloppy and that these issues should be taken up with expedition.

The Solicitor-General: We are taking the Act seriously, and the statements. We started with public Bills. However, I take my hon. Friend's argument. He raises a serious point about private Bills, for example. The concerns that he has expressed on previous occasions have been taken on board. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is considering them seriously. As for the Local Government Bill, Ministers will have to give an explanation to the House and in Committee in due course. They will have to explain why some measures within it are not compliant, and why most are.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Have the Government estimated the number of cases that will arise under the European convention when the new provisions come into force, the additional burden on the court system and the additional costs?

The Solicitor-General: An announcement was made yesterday, and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was given some figures. We have admitted from the outset that costs are involved in training and litigation. Initially, we expect that human rights problems will be raised in ordinary cases, and they will be dealt with in the ordinary way. We have anticipated additional costs, and there is no doubt that they will arise. We say that there are advantages in promoting a human rights culture. To take up the slogan that was used on one occasion by a leader of the Conservative party, "Rejoice, rejoice."

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): To follow up the point about creating a human rights culture, does my hon. and

learned Friend believe that we are succeeding in doing that, or does he share my concern that discussion about the impact of the Human Rights Act 1998 has focused on minor aspects of it that will cause complications rather than on the fact that we are giving legal rights to our citizens?

The Solicitor-General: My hon. Friend is right. Many misconceptions have been sown about this matter, and there has been much concentration on litigation, which is the issue that the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) raised. We are trying to change the whole culture, initially in the public services, so that they will deal with matters in the right way, but more generally in the community.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): As the House knows, the European convention on human rights already impacts on our law. I refer the Solicitor-General to the Starrs case, which has given rise to a significant rethink in the Lord Chancellor's Department, as was shown in a written answer given yesterday by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy). Although that case deals with judicial appointments, is the Solicitor-General satisfied that it does not impact in any way on appointments in his Department or on any person for whom he is accountable to the House?

The Solicitor-General: That particular case involved judicial appointments and quasi-judicial appointments. As yesterday's statement indicated, certain changes have been made. It is vital that we underline the independence of the judiciary, and that has been done. For example, the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), the shadow Attorney-General, has by virtue of that statement become a recorder. He is no longer an assistant recorder, because assistant recorders have only short-term appointments.

Judicial independence is important, and it is also important that tribunals are seen to be independent. That brings me back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart). Although individual cases and structures are important, it is more the culture of rights and responsibilities—I emphasise the word "responsibilities"—that we are attempting to promote by our legislation.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): There is much speculation about the readiness of our legal system to cope with the implementation of convention rights in domestic law later this year. What assurance can my hon. and learned Friend give to the House about the state of readiness of Law Officers themselves and of those parts of the legal system, such as the Crown Prosecution Service, for which they are responsible?

The Solicitor-General: I hope that I am absolutely and completely ready. As the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) suggested, the convention has been in force and been part of our law since 1951. It is nothing new. We constantly have to give advice on human rights matters. All that has happened is that the Human Rights Act has domesticated those rights, so that remedies can be sought in domestic courts.

My hon. Friend referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, and a great deal of training has taken place. By October, when the Act comes into effect, all crown prosecutors will be thoroughly trained. It is interesting that, in the training process, a great deal of co-operation between the Crown Prosecution Service and the police has occurred; police and prosecutors have worked together. *[Interruption.]* I know that the introduction of the Act is a source of mirth for Conservative Members, but it is a serious and important measure that will promote rights and responsibilities in this country.

Europe

22. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): What areas of United Kingdom law have been affected by *(a)* accession to EU treaties by the United Kingdom and *(b)* decisions of the European Court in the last three years. [117753]

The Solicitor-General: Each year the United Kingdom becomes bound by obligations under international agreements affecting almost every area of policy. These range from the environment to air traffic to patents.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the European Court. As he knows there are two. The European Court of Justice delivers judgments in all areas where there is a European Community law dimension. Again, the range is wide, covering competition law, employment law, environmental protection and state aids. As a member of the European Community, we are bound by the judgments of the court.

In addition, there is the European Court of Human Rights, which I have just mentioned. It affects all areas of United Kingdom law in which convention rights exist.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I thank the Minister for that reply. Is it not true that, whenever the British Government agree to treaty changes handing over responsibility for whole chunks of policy—for example, the social policy aspect of the Amsterdam treaty—the democratic accountability of this Parliament is diminished and the independence of our judiciary is fettered? Would it not be better if such matters were dealt with by national Governments, whenever possible, instead of by unelected European institutions?

The Solicitor-General: The hon. Gentleman's original question contained more misconceptions per square inch than I have seen for a while; the supplementary contained even more.

We are members of the European Community. The hon. Gentleman's Government were in office for 18 years; they signed treaties that resulted in the European Commission acquiring certain powers. I realise that certain hon. Members sitting near the hon. Gentleman are members of the café society—Conservatives Against a Federal Europe—

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am not.

The Solicitor-General: I am reassured by that. However, the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is a member of that society, and its members believe in getting out of Europe. I hope that the hon. Member for

Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) will explain to his constituents how many jobs would be lost as a result of that policy.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Does my hon. and learned Friend consider that the European Court of Justice has any value to the United Kingdom, and if so, what is that value?

The Solicitor-General: The ECJ enforces the treaty. That is important because it introduces the rule of law throughout Europe. Too often during the previous century, the rule of law has not been effective in some parts of Europe.

We value the work of the ECJ. For example, yesterday, I was before the court, arguing a case involving the cigarette advertising directive. If we are successful in that case, we shall quickly be able to introduce effective regulations to ban cigarette advertising. The resultant benefit to human health will be considerable.

There are problems with the European Court. For example, there are delays. However, the court has developed a plan for improvements in its procedures; we support such reforms.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister not realise that severe dangers are posed to our sovereignty by the moves in Brussels and Strasbourg to replace English law by the code Napoleon? Will he tell us whether the Government are prepared to stand against the plans for corpus juris? Does he acknowledge the huge concern caused by the fact that so much of vital interest to our citizens bypasses the UK and the House, and is being addressed with no democratic accountability at all?

The Solicitor-General: I know that the hon. Gentleman is also a member of the café society—so that is where he is coming from—but he is scaremongering. On the corpus juris proposals, all that has happened is that an interim report has been produced—there is not even a final report. The important point about the report was that it addressed the serious problem of fraud in the community—against which measures must be taken. We have said that the best way to approach the problem would be for member states to act co-operatively. There is no scope for a public prosecutor; we have made it plain that we reject that idea. We have also made it clear that there is no scope for a European criminal code. As for the reference to the code Napoleon, that is cloud cuckoo land.

Government Legal Service

23. **Valerie Davey** (Bristol, West): What steps are being taken to ensure equal career opportunities for women in the Government legal service. [117754]

The Solicitor-General: The Government legal service takes very seriously the issue of equal career opportunities for women. The head of the GLS is personally leading work by a group of lawyers, drawn from across the service, who will examine its contribution to the modernising Government agenda. That, of course, includes diversity issues. The service supports and encourages different working patterns; another working group is looking specifically at such practices so as to increase the opportunities for lawyers to work part-time, to job-share or to work at home. The Treasury Solicitor's department has recently introduced a mentoring scheme for all its lawyers; under that scheme, women in senior posts are available to provide advice and encouragement to their more junior colleagues.

Valerie Davey: I welcome that response. May I press my hon. and learned Friend to tell us how many women have been appointed to the Government legal service and, more particularly, to senior posts?

The Solicitor-General: Just under 50 per cent. of the Government legal service is composed of women, and just over a quarter of staff in the senior civil service are women. The record in the Government legal service is therefore quite good, but we should not be complacent. Underachievement in recruiting women to higher posts can be explained historically, and in part by the attitude of the previous Government. We take gender and diversity seriously, and that is changing the impression of service in government. As Ministers, we have pressed the Government legal service to do as much as possible. Sixty per cent. of recruits to the service are women, and with time, that will have a profound effect on the numbers appointed to senior posts.

Business of the House

12.31 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 17 APRIL—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 18 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Postal Services Bill.

WEDNESDAY 19 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Utilities Bill.

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

THURSDAY 20 APRIL—Motion on the Easter recess Adjournment debate.

I remind the House that that sitting will follow a Friday pattern: I would hate to see hon. Members arriving for a different pattern of sitting.

The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages which may be received.

The business for the week after the Easter break will be as follows:

TUESDAY 2 MAY—Progress on consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill.

WEDNESDAY 3 MAY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 4 MAY—Debate on the Royal Commission report on the reform of the House of Lords on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 5 MAY—Private Members' Bills.

I should like to inform the House of business to be taken in Westminster Hall for when the House is sitting during May.

THURSDAY 4 MAY—Debate on a sporting future for all.

THURSDAY 11 MAY—Debate on a Select Committee report—subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 18 MAY—Debate on the future of the construction industry.

THURSDAY 25 MAY—There will be no debates in Westminster Hall.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for next week's business and an indication of business for the week after the Easter recess. Does the right hon. Lady envisage making a business statement next Thursday?

I am glad that at long last we are to debate the Wakeham report, although I note that the chosen date of 4 May is one when the country's attention may be focused on other events. The House is due to debate the Utilities Bill on Wednesday. Has the Leader of the House anything further to tell us about Government amendments to the Bill, as 359 have already been tabled? Do the Government plan to withdraw even more clauses?

In view of the growing interest in the way in which the House operates, may we debate the Liaison Committee's report promoted at Prime Minister's Question Time by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay)—possibly the only promotion that he is likely to see?

There is continued concern in the House about events in Zimbabwe. Will the Foreign Secretary undertake to keep the House informed?

Will the Leader of the House tell us whether statements are expected next week on defence procurement or on the future of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency?

Could we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport clarifying whether the Government have prejudged the bid to run the lottery? On Tuesday, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson), declared in Westminster Hall:

> The Government always have been, and still are, committed to a not-for-profit lottery.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 11 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 11WH.]

Does that remain true when there are two bids?

Finally, can we have a debate on the report on Rover by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, in view of continuing concern about the future of motor manufacturing in this country?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): It sounds as though we will be here all Easter.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right: that is an extensive programme.

I anticipate making a business statement next Thursday and hope, through discussion with the usual channels, to establish a time that is convenient for the House.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) was uncharacteristically ungracious about the timing of our debate on the reform of the House of Lords. He has been calling for the debate for some time and the day set is, after all, a sitting day. He argues that there will be passionate interest in local elections; I hope that he is right.

The Utilities Bill will be debated in the House in the near future. I do not anticipate dramatic changes, although it is right that the House should make that legislation effective.

I have taken note of the desire expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) that the Liaison Committee's report should be debated. The Government are giving the report's many profound recommendations careful consideration, and we will report to the House in due course.

We shall endeavour to keep the House informed about Zimbabwe.

I cannot say now whether or when a statement is likely on the defence issues raised by the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire.

Furthermore, having already had several debates and statements on Rover, I do not anticipate that another is likely in the near future, although I shall certainly bear the right hon. Gentleman's remarks in mind.

The claims that either the Department for Culture, Media and Sport or the Government have prejudged the award of the lottery contract cannot possibly be true. As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows, the selection of the next operator of the national lottery is not a matter for the Government; it is a matter for the National Lottery Commission. I understand that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport,

has written to him about the matter, and that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be answering a question in the near future to put the matter beyond doubt.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Has my right hon. Friend had time to read early-day motion 614, on free long-term care for the elderly?

[*That this House warmly welcomes the support for free long-term nursing home care for the elderly expressed by the Secretary of State for Health following his speech to the Royal College of Nursing Congress in Bournemouth on 5th April; notes that this is in line with the recommendations of the Royal Commission Report on Long Term Care, With Respect to Old Age, published in March 1999; asks the Secretary of State to make a formal statement to the House at the earliest opportunity; and urges the Government to bring forward legislation as soon as possible, abolishing means-tested charges for elderly, nursing and residential home care and lifting the burden from all those elderly citizens who are in, or soon to enter, long-term care.*]

My right hon. Friend will be aware of the awful current arrangements, under which the elderly and the sick are subjected to means-tested nursing charges—a concept quite at odds with the ideals of the national health service. Has our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said whether he intends to make a statement in the near future?

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware of the great interest taken by my hon. Friend and many other hon. Members in those issues, which are of considerable importance. The Government are considering all the recommendations of the royal commission on long-term care in the context of our overall spending review. My hon. Friend can be confident that, when we have announcements to make, they will be made to the House.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): We strongly endorse the call for an early debate on the Liaison Committee's report, but may I draw to the right hon. Lady's attention the fact that that is a House of Commons matter? It is not primarily a matter for the Government, so to hear that the Government are giving careful consideration to the report's profound recommendations fills me with considerable concern; that is the nearest thing to a kick into the long grass that we have heard this afternoon.

I endorse the view of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) that an early debate on Lords reform is extremely important, if we are obtain a statement from the Government on the timetable for phase 2. There is a widespread view in the House that the status quo is not a long-term option; it can only go on for a year or two. The appointments system is so ridiculous and has been brought into such disrepute by recent events that it cannot continue.

Will the Leader of the House find time after the Easter recess to debate the continuing and increasingly obvious problem of political amnesia which appears to have struck some hon. Members in recent days? Not only have Conservatives failed to remember their tax increases, but, yesterday, they completely failed to remember their own action in respect of the closure of post offices. If the right hon. Lady was present for Agriculture questions a few minutes ago, she will know that they now have the nerve to have forgotten completely not only their mismanagement of the BSE crisis, but their demolition of the milk marketing scheme, which completely destroyed dairy farmers.

Mrs. Beckett: I heard, with astonishment equal to the hon. Gentleman's, the remarks that the Leader of the Opposition made yesterday about the closure of post offices, and I have frequently heard extraordinary remarks about tax increases. I missed the Conservatives' forgetting that they had some hand in the BSE crisis, but I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for calling it to my attention. I shall certainly bear in mind that that is yet another area in which Conservatives, who were still talking about the record of the previous Labour Government 18 years after they had ceased to hold office, do not seem to be able to remember what they were doing little more than 18 months ago.

With regard to the other issues that the hon. Gentleman raised, I hope that we will have a constructive and useful debate about Lords reform. As I hope the hon. Gentleman is aware, the Government are keen to proceed with further reform, which we hope to be able to do on the basis of common ground and consensus. It is not clear whether that is a possibility, but the Government are anxious to explore it. There was an earlier debate in the Lords, and it will be helpful to see how the debate goes in this House.

On the Liaison Committee report, I fully accept that that is a matter for the House. I understand the hon. Gentleman's remarks, in the knock-about of this place, about the Government saying that they would give it careful consideration, but he would not be very pleased if we said that we would not give it careful consideration.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Any progress on the Intelligence and Security Committee annual report debate?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Shh! It's a secret.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I am not in a position to give my hon. Friend any information about that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Does the Leader of the House recognise that the principal example of political amnesia in recent months has been the inability of the Prime Minister to remember that the fox hunting Bill of the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) never went near the House of Lords at all, delighted though I am that we are to debate House of Lords reform?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point. However, the Prime Minister has always made it plain that it was consideration of the impact on the Government's programme primarily, though not solely in the House of Lords, which led the Government to the conclusion—[HON. MEMBERS: "Come on!] There is no point in Opposition Members whingeing about it.

As it was made crystal clear to the Government that in the House of Lords there were Members who felt even more strongly about the freedom to continue killing foxes than about the freedom to continue operating as the House of Lords—in other words, they attached greater

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importance to that issue than to House of Lords reform—the Government were under no illusions. Indeed, we were explicitly threatened that it would cost us the rest of our legislative programme if we did anything in that Parliament further to progress that private Member's Bill. It was clear, therefore, that there was nothing to be gained—certainly, the Bill could not be gained—by finding extra time. That was the Government's conclusion. If it is the view of Opposition Members that these are not matters of balance and judgment as to where advantage can be gained and lost, no wonder they are in opposition and we are in government.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we debate the extraordinary recent history of British Nuclear Fuels, which has been condemned internationally for falsifying safety reports? This week *The Guardian* and "Dispatches" revealed correspondence—the documents look impressive and appear to be genuine—which claim that British Nuclear Fuels public affairs department has allegedly conspired with hon. Members to undermine the work of one Minister and one Back Bencher.

Mrs. Beckett: I have seen brief reference to the documents to which my hon. Friend refers. I have no knowledge as to whether they are genuine. All I can say is that the attempts appear to have been conspicuously unsuccessful.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Will the right hon. Lady acknowledge that it is time that we had a proper debate on foreign affairs, not only in view of the extremely grave situation in Rhodesia, which potentially affects the livelihood and security of British nationals, but because of the bizarre statement by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), who called on Premier Oil to withdraw from the Yetagun oil project in Myanmar, without any legal basis for such an instruction? Is not the Government's foreign policy totally discredited and increasingly embattled? If China acts against Tibetans, or the Russians obliterate Grozny, the Government do not seem to care, but a British company legally doing business in Myanmar must pack its bags and go home.

Mrs. Beckett: At Foreign Office questions, some 40 minutes was spent on Zimbabwe, which is the country's name.

The hon. Gentleman is entitled to differ from the Minister's attitude to Burma. However, it is widely acknowledged that the civil and human rights position in that country is appalling. Indeed, many people would argue that it was uniquely awful. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not believe that it is right for Ministers at the British Foreign Office to bring pressure to bear to improve that position.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): The all-party group on domestic violence has recently concluded an online consultation—which involved 1,000 contributions from communities throughout the country—with survivors of domestic violence. The powerful contributions include evidence of violence and abuse against children, and even child death through the courts granting child contact orders to families with a history of domestic violence. Will my right hon. Friend agree to an early debate to enable hon. Members to consider ways in which we can amend the Children Act 1989 to protect children who desperately need our help?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's anxiety about this important subject. I also understand her wish to remind the House of the value of the online consultation, in which she has taken a great interest and which she is trying to develop so that hon. Members can use modern technology to gain even more information, and to give people the opportunity to make their views and concerns known here. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for an early debate on the specific subject to which she refers, and that the Government are not in a position to consider the Children Act 1989. However, the issue is worth airing, and I recommend to my hon. Friend the proceedings in Westminster Hall.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the right hon. Lady cast her mind back to yesterday's debate on sub-post offices, when the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry mentioned the possibility of subsidies for sub-post masters and mistresses? So little detail was provided that I said:

> There was talk of subsidy. How much? How is it to be dealt with? Has it been agreed with the Treasury? I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will clarify the matter.—[*Official Report*, 12 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 394.]

To be generous, perhaps the Minister did not spell it out because of time constraints. Nevertheless, the matter was not clarified. It is so important to the lives of sub-post masters and mistresses that we should have a statement next week so that they know what the Government are up to.

Mrs. Beckett: We shall have a debate on the remaining stages of the Postal Services Bill on Tuesday, and an opportunity to raise the matter may arise then. Of course, my right hon. Friend had clearance from the Treasury to make his observations. However, details of the proposals may still be under consideration; we are talking about proposals that will be considered if problems arise. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will welcome the steps that the Government are taking to safeguard the future of small sub-post offices. Those steps were not taken or even contemplated by the previous Government.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I ask my right hon. Friend to reconsider the possibility of holding an early debate next week on Rover in the light of today's Select Committee report. Tomorrow many thousands of Rover workers at Longbridge will go on a two-week shutdown. They do not know whether they will return to jobs or whether their futures will have been traded away to a group of venture capitalists. Today's Select Committee report emphasises the importance of careful consideration of alternative bids. Can we have a debate next week to ascertain how hon. Members and the Government can assist that process?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I understand, and the whole House recognises, that my hon. Friend and his parliamentary neighbours have done a great deal to advocate the cause of the workers at Longbridge and continue to keep up their great interest in and advocacy

of that work force's perfectly understandable concerns. He rightly says that the Select Committee has produced an important report, but he will know that the Government have not had much time to consider it. I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry; he may wish to draw them to the attention of the Liaison Committee, which makes proposals to the Government on debating Select Committee reports.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Will the Leader of the House consider having a debate after Easter on accountability for ministerial statements? I ask for such a debate because on 13 April 1999 the then Minister for Transport in London, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), made a remark. By correspondence, I sought a justification for it. A year later, I have received a letter from a private secretary in that Department saying:

> Ms Jackson's remark was based on briefing from the Labour party and your correspondence has accordingly been treated as political.

I seek a debate because that is a method by which Ministers can side-step their accountability to Parliament for remarks made at the Dispatch Box. We also need to know when Ministers are making party political statements on behalf of the Labour party and are therefore not accountable and when they are speaking as Ministers with proper briefing. That is an important matter and I hope that the Leader of the House will be able to accede to my request.

Mrs. Beckett: I can think of few less profitable ways of spending time.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): My right hon. Friend may be aware that the deadline for adding herbicide-tolerant maize to the national list of seed varieties is only a week away. If that maize is added to the national list, it will, for the first time, enable genetically modified crops to be grown commercially in this country. Given the public concerns that have been raised over GM technology, will the Government find time for an early debate on that important issue?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate in the near future, although, like my hon. Friend, I recognise how close that deadline is. I am aware that the relevant Ministers have the matter under review, and she will probably know that it has been made plain that the Government do not intend to allow commercial planting until tests have been extensively studied. However, I shall draw her remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): May I follow up the question asked by the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown)? The Leader of the House says that the Government will not allow planting, but once GM maize is on the seed list there will be nothing to prevent it from being planted, other than the good will of the manufacturers involved. Will she find time for a debate? People who rightly want to object to the addition of GM crops to the seed list have to pay £30 for the privilege. As if that were not bad enough, they will not be able to object at all in future years because the matter will be entirely for the Minister to decide. Will the right hon. Lady consider that?

Mrs. Beckett: Again, all I can do is undertake to draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks and concerns to the attention of my right hon. Friend. I fear that I cannot find time for a debate in the House in the near future, but the hon. Gentleman, like my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), may want to consider the merits of Westminster Hall.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Does my right hon. Friend fancy having a statement next week encapsulating her thoughts on what happened on the Floor of the House this week? On Monday, a question on asylum, which is a very important subject, took 21 minutes. Tuesday was much better as an answer on Zimbabwe given at the end of Foreign Office questions rescued Question Time, but on Wednesday, by my calculation, the Leader of the Opposition occupied some 18 minutes of Prime Minister's questions.

By what alchemy or authority does a Leader of the Opposition have a right to ask six questions? Is it understood how demeaning it is to Parliament to see the ranting that is now Prime Minister's questions? Can we not go back to the old custom of addressing questions not to the day's engagements, but specifically to the Prime Minister's responsibilities? Anything else should be transferred.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a discussion of the kind proposed by my hon. Friend, but I agree that there are occasions on which Prime Minister's Question Time may not be a good advertisement for the intellectual qualities and capacity of the House. You, Madam Speaker, frequently point that out to us all.

My hon. Friend's last point about the content of Question Time is very important. The trend that he identified has developed over many Parliaments, and I cannot say that I anticipate a likely return to a more subject-based Question Time; but I understand his concern, and I know the Chair feels that the House might have more regard to the way in which we conduct our debates. Perhaps all Members will heed those remarks.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): We are about to debate the longest Finance Bill for a century. Will the Leader of the House assure us that the Government's allocation of time for that debate will reflect the huge length of the Bill, and that we shall have time for proper discussion of, not least, the climate change levy—which, according to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury,

> will be revenue neutral for the private sector?

A representative of a company in my constituency—LINPAC Group, one of the most successful private firms in the country—wrote to me saying of the Financial Secretary:

> I do not know which planet he is from but I notice that he says the Levy package is expected to be broadly neutral between manufacturing and services!

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

A debate is urgently needed, because the prospect of the levy is causing real hardship and concern to local manufacturers.

Mrs. Beckett: We have just engaged in debates on the Budget itself. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was able to contribute, but certainly a number of days are available on which Members can raise such concerns.

I recognise that this is the longest Finance Bill in history; indeed, I am particularly mindful of the fact. The hon. Gentleman may not be aware that the Bill contains measures that repeal other legislation, including, I understand, some 40 pages of complex legislation on paying and collecting agents. Nevertheless, the Government appreciate that the House will want proper arrangements for discussion of the Bill. As I hope the hon. Gentleman knows, that is one of the reasons why the Government continue to promote the attractiveness of proper programming of debates: only by such means can we ensure that issues that are rightly of genuine concern to Members can be aired.

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the impact of the high pound on the car components industry, especially in view of the recent closures and job losses in Wales? Aeroquip, in my constituency, has lost 140 jobs, and Alloy Wheels in Whitchurch—also in my constituency—has lost 250. Both announcements have been made within the last 10 days.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern for her constituents, and for the prosperity of businesses in her constituency. She will know, however, that much depends on the degree to which individual companies are exporting to Europe rather than elsewhere, and that the situation is complex and difficult. She will also know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor sought to ease the position of the business community through a variety of means in the Budget. Members will have an opportunity to air these matters during the debates on the Finance Bill, to which my hon. Friend no doubt hopes to contribute.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central) *rose—[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady should not mind what the Opposition are saying. I will deal with them in a moment.

Ms Winterton: Will my right hon. Friend find time for the House to debate whether legislation is now necessary to make kerb crawling an arrestable offence? There are particular areas in my constituency where residents feel extremely threatened by the activities of kerb crawlers and are understandably worried about the safety of their children. Local police have made it clear to me that a change in the law is necessary. Can my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that she will look at the issue seriously?

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware of the fact that my hon. Friend has long campaigned on that important issue. Kerb crawling causes great distress to families, particularly because of its effect on children. The Government accept that there is a strong argument that a specific power of arrest would assist the police in dealing with the problem. I am not in a position to tell her at present that we are likely to introduce such a provision in the very near future, but we are looking at including it in some of the draft legislation that the Government are considering and hope to publish for consultation in the not-too-distant future.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Is not the problem with Prime Minister's questions that the Prime Minister does not like to come to the Dispatch Box? Let us go back to having two Prime Minister's Question Times a week—on a Tuesday and a Thursday for 15 minutes each. I was quite happy with that.

We failed to get the Prime Minister to the Dispatch Box to make a statement following his summit with farmers, so is it possible to have a full day's debate on the state of agriculture, which is in the worst crisis for 60 years—indeed, it has been exacerbated during the past three years of the Labour Government? Even post the aid package that was announced, farmers are still reeling and suffering—farmers such as Paul Kenny in my constituency, who cannot make a profit out of farming.

During today's Agriculture questions, aid to pig farming was mentioned. The Leader of the House may not have noticed, but the protest is still taking place in Parliament square. Winnie the pig is still there. If the right hon. Lady cares to come with me after Prime Minister's questions to have a chat with the farmers there, I will hold her hand as we cross the road.

Mrs. Beckett: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, the National Farmers Union has welcomed the package that the Government have announced. I fear that he is nurturing an illusion. There may be only one Winnie the pig, but there is a substantial number of pigs—they are working shifts, I understand—on the demonstration. The hon. Gentleman will be happy to know that it is not one solitary pig being progressively poisoned by fumes in Parliament square. *[Interruption.]* If they are all called Winnie, I hope that they are all female pigs.

I do not know why the hon. Gentleman keeps making that rather tedious point about the Prime Minister not liking to come to the House. As I have pointed out to the hon. Gentleman on many occasions, the Prime Minister attends Prime Minister's Question Time more frequently than his predecessor. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that he is happy with the way it was before, when the then Prime Minister came less often, that is less than kind to the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Apparently, the Home Office is sitting on a report that it commissioned from Professor Paul Weller, which suggests that the next monarch should be crowned by Buddhist priests and representatives of other religions in a ceremony not entirely dissimilar from that which opened the millennium dome. Might we have a statement on those proposals? It seems to some us rather odd that the first commandment seems to have escaped the Government, which contains so many professing Christians.

Mrs. Beckett: I am happy to say that I am entirely unaware of any such report. I am not entirely sure how

accurate—if such a report exists—the hon. Gentleman's description of it is. If, however, it is accurate, perhaps it is a good thing that the Home Office is sitting on it.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that it is about six weeks since the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended after the threats by the Ulster Unionists? Will there be a statement soon as to what will happen about the Members who are still being paid? It seems odd to some of us that that Assembly needs to get back to how it was before, yet, at the same time, the Members are drawing the money. It looks to me as though they will continue in that vein for ever unless, at some point, someone says that the Assembly has to start again. What are the conditions for that happening? Will there be a statement on the matter? Are we going to get that Assembly back on the road? If we do not, those Members will continue being paid a salary for not attending, and that will produce only gridlock.

Mrs. Beckett: As my hon. Friend will know, the Government are very anxious indeed to see the institutions begin to work again. I am very mindful, having heard from someone who has been close to some of the negotiations, of what a pleasure it was to hear Members from Northern Ireland begin to argue about matters such as housing and education. We all wish those discussions again to become the focus of political concerns in the Province. I fear, however, that I cannot find time in the near future for a debate on the further implications of the suspension to which my hon. Friend referred. Perhaps he will have a chance to the air the matter at the next Northern Ireland Question Time.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Madam Speaker, you probably are not familiar with European Commission document COM (1999) 719 Final, which proposes the establishment of a European food authority and was debated yesterday in European Standing Committee C. The debate was attended by only 15 hon. Members. If the 84 action points in the document's annexe were implemented, it would effectively usurp all British law on food production and agriculture. It would also make redundant the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the recently established Food Standards Agency and much local authority activity.

Yesterday, I pressed the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), three times for a White Paper on the matter to be debated on the Floor of the House. The document's consequences are so momentous that they could effectively result in a programme that is larger than this Session's Queen's Speech. Will the Leader of the House give serious consideration to a full Government White Paper and a full debate on the document on the Floor of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, the preparation of a Government White Paper is not the work of a matter of moments. However, I certainly understand the concern that he expresses, and I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend. I cannot, however, undertake readily to find time in the near future for such a debate on the Floor of the House.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Could my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the plans recently announced by the Whitworths Group to close its plant in Warrington, with the loss of approximately 250 jobs? In view of the high-handed way in which that company has behaved, and its failure to recognise trade unions in its Warrington plant, is it not time that we had a debate, with a Minister at the Dispatch Box, so that we could discuss the role of companies that behave more like 19th-century mill owners than modern employers?

Mrs. Beckett: I am certainly sorry to learn of the concerns that my hon. Friend identifies and of the problems that are caused to her constituents. I fear, however, that I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a debate in the House on the matter. May I, however, again recommend to her the virtues of Westminster Hall, which I believe has doubled the opportunities for Back-Bench Members to raise such issues in an Adjournment debate.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Given the uncharacteristically brusque response of the Leader of the House to the important question on parliamentary accountability asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), I hesitate to ask another question on the subject. *[Interruption.]* I shall, nevertheless, risk it.

Will the right hon. Lady find time for a statement by the Minister for the Cabinet Office on the role of prime ministerial special envoys who are, of course, unaccountable to Parliament in relation to their security clearances and to briefings that they may have had from either United Kingdom or foreign intelligence services?

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Lord Levy.

Dr. Lewis: Such a statement would give the House a chance to obtain more information from the Minister than I was able to obtain on Tuesday, when I asked a very pertinent related question of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) on Lord Levy.

Mrs. Beckett: Quite properly, the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members have taken the opportunity to raise the issue of the role of Lord Levy. The Government have made it plain that Lord Levy has occasionally played a valuable role, and that the processes and discussions in which he has occasionally been engaged have been ones that we hope will help to facilitate the cause of peace. I should hope that all hon. Members would support such processes.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Although the twice-weekly Prime Minister's questions may have provided more time for Back Benchers, there is—as my hon. Friend for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said—a feeling of dissatisfaction over Prime Minister's Question Time now because of the very limited opportunities provided to Back Benchers. Although the Conservatives will make spiteful remarks about the Prime Minister, would it be possible to examine the matter through the usual channels? Far more than half the half-hour is given to the two Front Benches, and time is then given to the leader of the Liberal Democrats. The opportunities for those of us who table questions regularly—and who are lucky if we get into the top four or five more than twice a year—are very limited.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. As the record shows, he is entirely correct to say that the

[Mrs. Beckett]

concern expressed by the Opposition is more than a little spurious. The Prime Minister has withdrawn from Question Time the supplementary remarks that used to be interspersed between questions, which has created more time. The Prime Minister has answered more questions than his predecessor in the equivalent period of time. Given the time and the number of questions that may be answered, I understand my hon. Friend's concern that Back Benchers do not have as much time as most hon. Members would think desirable. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will take heed of his remarks.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that it is only two days since the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Janet Anderson), said explicitly in Westminster Hall that the Government were committed to a not-for-profit lottery—only to be comprehensively contradicted within 48 hours by her boss and by the Leader of the House—is it not essential, under the terms of the ministerial code of conduct and the guidance to Ministers, for that Minister to come to the House without delay and offer a full explanation and apology? Does the Leader of the House acknowledge that, if the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting does not do that, the suspicion that the Government are zealous lobbyists for Richard Branson, and that they have fatally compromised the independence of the National Lottery Commission, will inevitably gain ground?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I do not think that any reasonable person would draw such a conclusion, nor do I think that there is a need for what the hon. Gentleman suggests. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport made the Government's position perfectly plain in Westminster Hall. She also commented on the Government's welcome for not-for-profit bidders, as well as for bidders who are not not-for-profit, if I may put it that way. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary wrote to the Opposition spokesman setting out the position. The hon. Gentleman has now tabled a parliamentary question, which has been answered. The Government's position is clear and on the record, and the matter has been dealt with.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), can we find time to debate the need for a public inquiry into the management and future of Sellafield, particularly in view of the growing evidence of a culture of institutional falsification, as well as the allegations to which my hon. Friend referred? Can we review the economic, employment and environmental implications of ceasing reprocessing and switching work to decommissioning and safety?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend calls for an announcement of a public inquiry, and I understand that he is anxious for the many issues surrounding operations at Sellafield to be aired. However, such inquiries take considerable time. If he would like the Government to consider the problems, BNFL to take action within its remit, and the Government and the safety inspectorate to take action within their remit, a public inquiry may not be the fastest course of action. I undertake to draw my hon. Friend's concerns to the attention of relevant Ministers.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Can my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on health, and in particular this week's report from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence on hip replacements, which goes a long way towards fulfilling the Government's commitment to abolishing the postcode lottery? That approach could then be contrasted with the approach taken in an article by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), the shadow Health Secretary, in which he proposed that all hip replacement operations should be private, at a cost of £5,000 each.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right: the guidance issued by NICE is both authoritative and welcome and is a clear indication of the improvements that we are gradually beginning to make in the health service, although there is much more to do. He is also right to say that that stands in stark contrast to the pronouncements of the Conservative party, whose policy on health seems to target the elderly, as it is predominantly elderly people who are most in need of the operations that the shadow Health Secretary wants to be handled only by the private sector. Tempting though that makes such a debate, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for it in the near future.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend will consider a debate in Government time on the way in which local authorities use bailiffs. Such a debate would enable the House to consider the rules and procedures that local authorities use when sending out bailiffs and might help to prevent the further incompetent deployment of bailiffs by Westminster city council, which caused considerable distress to my constituent, Mr. Lanning, and his family by sending out bailiffs to collect fines that had already been paid well within the council's required period.

Mrs. Beckett: I am certainly sorry to learn of the distress caused to my hon. Friend's constituent by the actions of Westminster city council, and I understand his concern, but I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future. He will be aware that the Local Government Bill is under discussion and proceeding through the House, and it may afford him an opportunity to raise these matters. I believe that the issue of the use of bailiffs is already under review.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on class sizes? In Croydon, the proportion of five, six and seven-year-olds in classes of more than 30 has fallen from 32 per cent. to 10 per cent. since 1997. I understand that, a year ago, on the "Today" programme, Steven Norris, the Tory mayoral candidate, said that he was concerned that the Conservatives had failed to deliver improvements in public sector education. In that year, the proportion of children in large class sizes has been halved. It is important to have a debate to set the record straight: we have delivered where the Tories have confessed to failure.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. Not only in Croydon but throughout the country the number of

children in very large infant classes has halved. It is generally accepted in the world of education that, as the evidence suggests, class sizes are most crucial in those early years. That is why the Government have focused on that area. However, although such a debate would indeed provide an opportunity to examine the record of both the Conservatives and the Government, I fear that it is yet another attractive opportunity that I shall have to decline for now.

BILL PRESENTED

LICENSING (CANNABIS)

Mr. Paul Flynn presented a Bill to allow the supply and consumption of cannabis and cannabis resin on licensed premises: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 9 June, and to be printed [Bill 113].

Points of Order

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Yesterday, you were kind enough to hear my point of order, and you were also in the Chair for business questions today. In the light of the response of the Leader of the House to what I said, may I ask you to reflect on the resolution of the House, detailed on page 63 of "Erskine May", that

> ministers have a duty to Parliament to account, and be held to account, for the policies, decisions and actions of their departments . . . ?

I do not believe that I have had a satisfactory reply to the important point that I raised. I ask you to reflect on the matter and give a ruling on how Ministers should be accountable for what they say in the House.

Madam Speaker: At the risk of appearing brusque to some hon. Gentlemen, I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave yesterday, which was a considerable and considered one. I heard the exchange today and I was happy to give the right hon. Gentleman the opportunity to raise the matter with the Leader of the House. As he requests, I shall refresh my memory of "Erskine May" and see what I can do about the matter.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) raised his concern about the conduct of Prime Minister's questions, but you will have observed that several hon. Members, including me, were exercising their leg muscles to no productive effect during questions to the Solicitor-General and were disappointed that we got through only three questions in the 15 minutes allotted. Is it not reasonable in the circumstances to advise the Solicitor-General that he is deputed to answer questions, not Adjournment debates?

Madam Speaker: Three questions were taken, but the hon. Gentleman will, I am sure, readily accept that there were supplementaries to those questions. However, I am sure that the point has been taken.

Armed Forces Personnel

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

1.21 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I hope to be able to spend a little longer addressing the House than I was able to do on Third Reading of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. Before I move on to the details of our current policies and programmes on personnel, I want to put the debate in its broader context. It can almost seem a cliché in these debates when hon. Members refer to our armed forces as the best in the world, but it is certainly justified. That is also the view of the British public, who regularly in opinion polls put the armed forces up at the top of the groups they admire. The good thing about journalists is they sometimes prevent us politicians from being at the bottom of those tables.

That view is shared by the armed forces fellow military professionals around the world and by the wider international community who regularly look for contributions, particularly early contributions, from our armed forces. Whether fighting or peacekeeping, their reputation and their record is superb. But what is it that brings that about? We need to stress that it is not primarily equipment, very important though that is. After all, any country with sufficient resources can buy new kit.

The key element is the quality of our people both individually and, even more significantly, collectively. It is certainly true that individually our service men and women are superb. They are bright, capable, committed and enthusiastic. One of the best things about this job is getting out to meet our troops and hearing them describe what they do, the satisfaction they have in a job well done and the impact that has on the lives of others. However, in the broader context, even more significant has been the forces' ability over many years to create an identity, an ethos and a system for moulding the collective effort that is the key to their internationally recognised quality. We, as Defence Ministers, and the current service chiefs have to consider how we can best build on that.

The measure of our success as a Government is whether we enhance or erode that common purpose, and in what shape we hand it on. Now I realise that that could be seen as a hostage to fortune, but I believe it is, and should be, proper and agreed common ground on both sides of the House.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Is not the Minister concerned that a doctrine of political correctness—some of it imported, but a measure of it home grown—is undermining that ethos and constraining service life and training? What will he do about that?

Mr. Spellar: If that were the case, we would of course be concerned. As it is not, we are not.

So how are we doing? The answer is not badly. We have dealt with some of the more glaring problems, we have reacted quickly as new ones have arisen, and in some areas we still have some way to go—but we have plans for progress.

What does the situation look like on the front line? In the past 12 months, I have made a point of visiting our personnel whenever possible, to see what they do and to hear what they have to say. During my visits, I have been struck by a fact that is sometimes sadly overlooked, not least by the media. It is that our people greatly enjoy what they do. Again and again, talking to defence personnel, I and other hon. Members hear the refrain, "It's the best job in the world." That should not surprise us. We are employing people whose careers give them quite extraordinary opportunities to travel, to learn or to make a difference. Increasingly, that is what they do. They truly are a force for good worldwide.

We have forces deployed globally, reflecting Britain's interests as a key international player and a trading nation. In addition to our major deployments in the Balkans and the Gulf, personnel are deployed in support of United Nations operations in Cyprus, along the Iraq-Kuwait border, in Georgia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and East Timor. They are all making a magnificent contribution to ensuring peace and rebuilding shattered communities.

There can be little that is more rewarding than seeing that one's actions make people's lives better and knowing that one is making the world a safer place in which to live. Whether it is a pilot delivering supplies in Mozambique or a soldier bringing stability and safety to the streets of Pristina or providing advice in west Africa, our people can see that they are doing good.

Our personnel are chosen because of the people that they are: self-starting, enthusiastic and active. They enjoy being engaged on operations and relish the challenges that operations present. They take immense pride in doing what they do to the highest professional standards. Time and again, when talking to personnel on operations I, and others, encounter enthusiasm, pride and professionalism, even when a specific isolated task may be unpleasant and, indeed, even dangerous. I am sure that the House hardly needs me to remind it of the exemplary conduct displayed by our troops worldwide, including in such difficult circumstances as the unrest in the town of Mitrovica earlier this year. We are proud of them.

This House and the British people owe our personnel an enormous debt of gratitude for that unstinting enthusiasm and professionalism. By the same token, the support that our personnel receive from the British people, much of the media and this House means a great deal to them. It shows them that the great value of what they do is appreciated by the people back home. That is tremendously important to them, particularly when the immediate crisis has passed and their task has slipped from the public consciousness and from media attention.

It is important that all in this House remember that, away from the headlines, we have personnel on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year—366, this year—often in trying circumstances. In Ulster, the Balkans and the Gulf, our people are risking their lives day in, day out on our behalf. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our thanks and appreciation for what they do.

We cannot, however, ignore the price of such commitment. There is no doubt that the services are extremely busy and that is not just the front line. To keep units on operations requires a tremendous support organisation and that, too, has to work extremely hard to make operations a success. That high level of operational commitment has a number of effects. The first, and most obvious, is the pressure on personnel and their families, with long periods of separation, uncertainty and

disruption—none of these are good for family life. While an individual may be enjoying the challenges and excitement of an operational deployment, it can be a different story for the family left at home.

Early on, this Government recognised the pressures on our personnel and determined that we would take major steps to lessen those pressures, and we have. Whenever and wherever we can, we have been reducing commitments. The percentage of the trained Army that is now committed to operations is 27, which is slightly below that committed in 1997. Our ongoing restructuring of the armed forces will help.

We are being proactive and imaginative in reducing commitments. For instance, earlier this year we awarded a £20 million contract for the installation of a telecommunications network for our forces in the Balkans—that network will free 260 Royal Signals soldiers from their Balkans commitments by the end of this year. We all know of the pressures on our signals personnel. I will return to other measures to improve the lives of our people shortly.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the families left at home. Of course, families are also left in the Rhine Army, when personnel have gone to serve in Mitrovica or elsewhere in the Balkans. Can my hon. Friend say anything on the vexed question of overseas allowances? It is totally unsatisfactory that people should be getting less for serving in the Balkans than they do when they are in Rhine Army.

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend will be aware of the substantial amount of the overseas allowance that is still retained. I will deal later with the additional allowances that we have been providing for separation. I take my hon. Friend's point that there is a difficulty. This is an extremely complicated issue, which relates to taxation issues as well. I would be more than happy to correspond with my hon. Friend to explain some of the problems that we have encountered.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Everyone in the House will welcome the Minister's announcement about signallers. I think that the interval between operational tours for signallers in the current year is down to six months—a long way short of the 24 months that is supposed to be the ideal. What effect will the hon. Gentleman's announcement have on the interval between operational tours?

Mr. Spellar: It will assist. I take the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about the difficulties with signallers. The market in the telecommunications industry is extremely buoyant. I sometimes wish that the industry would train some more of its own people rather than benefiting from the excellent training that our people receive. We recognise that there is overstretch, which is why we are taking measures such as this to ameliorate the problem—not to solve it, because there is a substantial underlying problem facing us and other armed forces. We also need to look to the future to see how we can involve the reserve forces more and retain our training.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): In the light of the Minister's very specific answer on the Royal Signals and his mention of the reserve forces, can he explain why the number of permanent staff in the signals regiments in the Territorial Army has been reduced? How also will it assist standards in the Territorial Army if we take out the signals regiments from their professional signals brigades, which emphasise professional standards, and put them in with the ad hoc so-called regional brigades?

Mr. Spellar: That will relate to the operational requirements of the Army, because there are signals detachments in various parts of the Army. I will have to look into the other aspect of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, but there is always a balance to be struck between the highly skilled people who are required for operations and those who can provide training. There is always a difficulty, particularly when there is undermanning and a large number of engagements. It is within those broad parameters that we face difficulties and need to strike the right balance.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I recognise that the Minister wants to get on, and I do not want to delay him too long. He made a point earlier in his speech which led to some interventions. He said that the level of commitment was down to 27 per cent. for the Army. What is the figure for the armed forces overall, including the other two services?

Mr. Spellar: I am sure that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will give the hon. Gentleman those figures in his reply. However, we all recognise that the most substantial pressures have been in the Army, and we are very pleased to have reduced the figure to a more acceptable and manageable level.

A less obvious effect of operations is the impact on the training of our personnel. It may seem paradoxical, but being engaged on operations, particularly those undertaken in the Balkans and the Gulf, leads to a degree of skill fade among our personnel. The most difficult and collectively demanding thing our forces are trained to do is engage in high-intensity warfighting operations. To maintain their ability to conduct such operations, they need sophisticated and challenging training. This—particularly large-scale collective training—is, by and large, simply not possible for personnel deployed on operations.

It is crucial that our forces do not lose their ability to operate at the very highest end of the conflict spectrum. We cannot afford to relax standards here. Had we needed to fight our way into Kosovo last year, our forces' warfighting skills would have been at a premium. Not only is warfighting our forces ultimate raison d'être, but long experience has shown us that training hard for the high end of the conflict spectrum equips our forces with the sort of skills that we see put to valued use on non-warfighting operations too.

Successful collective training is, of course, dependent on successful individual training. It is, therefore, crucial that we have the best training system in place for the individuals in the armed forces and for the civilians who support them. That is why Lord Robertson announced, last July, a wide-ranging and fundamental review of individual training and education for the armed forces and Ministry of Defence civilians. That review is complementary to the strategic defence review.

[Mr. Spellar]

Training is a large and diverse business in the Ministry of Defence, which is the largest single supplier of training in the United Kingdom, and one of the largest in Europe. We train many thousands of people each year, from fast-jet pilots to finance officers. We run more than 40 training establishments, including a joint service command and staff college, a university and a sixth-form college. Like any large organisation, we must also ensure that not only those in the front line but those working in support are trained to conduct their business efficiently and effectively.

As with any other aspect of business, we must ensure from time to time that our training requirement is right and that it is being delivered to the proper standard, achieving the right result and providing value for money. We recognised that the time to do that was now. We need to ensure that the training and education that we provide will meet our operational and business needs in this new century. We need to make sure that our training is delivered by the most effective means, taking advantage of modern technology and methods of learning.

As a wider Government aim, we want to ensure that as much armed forces training and education as possible is relevant to, and recognised in, civilian life. We seek to provide skills for life, not just for the duration of a service career. That has been much appreciated by the service men and women with whom I have had discussions.

These considerations provide a compelling case for a review of our training and education activities. We have now completed the first stage of the review, identifying the key objectives and the areas on which we should focus. Like the strategic defence review, this review will be open and transparent. The House may be aware that I recently chaired a seminar at the Royal United Services Institute on this very subject. A range of distinguished participants from the services and from industry and education attended, all of whom made valuable contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) for participating in the seminar; his presence was appreciated.

The high value of our people and the need to do more for them have been constant themes of this Government. Improving the lives of service personnel and their families is a long-term goal that we set ourselves from the outset. We are achieving it through our "Policy for People" strategy.

We set out in the 1999 Defence White Paper how far we have come towards implementing that policy. We have introduced measures for individuals, and for families too. We have modernised the facilities available for our personnel. We said that we wanted modern forces for a modern world, and that means that we are committed to being modern also in our approach to personnel policies.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Clearly it is important that we get right the relationship with families and other dependants. However, when I was doing the armed forces parliamentary scheme last year, I was struck by the lack of appropriate accommodation and support for single people. Will my hon. Friend describe some of the action taken in that regard?

Mr. Spellar: I fully recognise the strength of my hon. Friend's point. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State will deal with the question of accommodation at greater length when he replies to the debate. The subject of single living accommodation has been neglected for many years. Buildings need to be repaired and refurbished, as my hon. Friend will describe.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I support the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). The Minister will be aware that Aldershot has some very substandard accommodation. The Normandy, Bruneval and Rhine barracks—a legacy of Poulson—are especially bad. I understand that they will not be removed until 2005. Given that a lot of single people will be coming to Aldershot with the Princess of Wales Royal Regiment and the Welsh Guards, will the Minister say whether there are any plans to bring forward the refurbishment programme?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman is right. The major and significant problem to which he refers is one of long standing. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will deal with the time scale at greater length later, but we recognise the problem.

Sir Archie Hamilton (Epsom and Ewell): If the rumours in the newspapers are right, the whole Aldershot site will be sold off. If so, are not the chances of the accommodation to which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) referred being improved almost nil?

Mr. Spellar: I have learned not to believe everything I read in the newspapers, not even when I put material into them. That applies especially in this instance. A report on initial training has been prepared for the Army. It focuses on the locations for that training throughout the country, on whether the training takes place at the right places and on whether there is a need for a rebalance, especially in terms of where we recruit for the armed forces, particularly for the Army.

A substantial part of Aldershot is not in the training area. I have already discussed the matter with the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), and provided him with an answer. I cannot be responsible for the headlines in the media, especially those in the Sunday press.

Mr. Howarth *rose—*

Mr. Spellar: No, I will not give way.

I am able easily to move into the subject of recruitment. We are doing more to encourage young people to join the armed forces. We wish to make them a career of first choice, and we are doing well. We are also doing more to encourage personnel to stay, although we still have some way to go.

I have already mentioned the effects of high levels of operational commitment. There are pressures on families and family life as well as on individuals. We are determined to do what we can to ensure that family life does not suffer as a result of the demands that we place on the armed forces. When we were conducting surveys during the strategic defence review, service personnel told us that separation was a considerable problem.

Not only did we listen to what we were told, we took action. We have made improvements to the package of benefits that personnel receive while on operations. We have increased the telephone allowance twice, from three

to 20 minutes a week, so that personnel can better keep in touch with those at home. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will recall events in East Timor and Mozambique, where British forces were deployed rapidly and at short notice to lend assistance to the United Nations and to disaster relief efforts. In both instances, welfare lessons learned in the Balkans were put to good use. Specifically, we learned that getting the provision of welfare telephones right was crucial. We acknowledged that there were problems in the Balkans and we did something about them. We introduced Project Welcome, a new contact for the provision of welfare telephones.

Project Welcome will ensure that personnel deployed on operations are able to keep in touch with their families back home. It is now working very well in the Balkans. It worked well in East Timor, and in Mozambique telephones were deployed with the lead elements of the force and were operational within 24 hours. However, in the Gulf region, where we have almost 1,500 personnel maintaining the northern and southern no-fly zones, we know that there have been some technical problems with the introduction of Project Welcome telephones. The speech quality of the original system was not good, and it was difficult for untrained personnel to use. These difficulties have been raised with us constructively by the Select Committee on Defence and by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), and I thank those involved for so doing.

We have taken temporary measures to resolve the problems. For the longer term, we shall shortly be changing the communications system used in the Gulf region. We are determined to make Project Welcome work for our personnel. We are not in the business of making hollow promises. Instead, we are delivering.

We are alive to the potential of modern technology. As I have reported before to the House, we have trialled an electronic bluey, an electronic version of the traditional forces aerogramme, with forces deployed to the Balkans and the Falkland Islands. We provide internet terminals at units and family centres throughout the country so that as many people as possible can have access to it, and we have installed internet communications on Royal Navy ships. Carriers are taking up to 1,000 e-mail messages a week and destroyers and frigates are taking about 50 to 80, and that is on a rising trend. We have introduced guaranteed periods of post-operational tour leave so that personnel can be assured that they will be able to spend time with their families when they return from operations.

I am particularly proud of the achievements of the service families taskforce, which I lead. It is continuing to address and overcome problems faced by service families that fall outside the scope of the Ministry of Defence alone. Many of these problems have been drawn to our attention by the excellent work of the families federation, to which I pay tribute. The taskforce is truly an example of joined-up government in action. We have brought together Departments and Ministers across Whitehall to resolve difficulties that have previously been significant disincentives to service life.

I am grateful to ministerial colleagues for their help in resolving these issues. The taskforce began its work in the autumn of 1998, and in its 18 months of existence impressive results have been achieved.

For the first time, the code of practice on schools admissions now makes specific reference to service children. Service children's education is now represented on new local authority admission forums in most areas where there are many service children, and local education authorities are now directed to be sensitive to the position of service children returning from abroad.

I was pleased to announce during my recent visit to RAF Waddington that children of armed forces personnel are now exempt from the three-year residence requirement normally needed to qualify for student loans. That means that service children will no longer be disadvantaged by the fact that their parents are serving abroad.As a result of problems brought to light by the service families taskforce, the national health service has established 24 incentive schemes for dentists to take on more NHS patients in areas where there are many service personnel.

We identified the fact that service spouses were failing—through no fault of their own—to meet the criteria to allow them to claim jobseeker's allowance when they moved around the country. Working with the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Social Security, we have therefore produced guidance to overcome that problem. We are also considering a number of other issues, such as how to help service children with special educational needs and, with the credit organisations, how to tackle the refusal of credit to service personnel. It is quite wrong that the men and women who serve their country should be denied—simply because we require them, as part of their duties, to move around more than the average, or to serve overseas—what so many of us take for granted.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Does the Minister not agree that one of the finest facilities for service children with special educational needs is provided at the school in the Cotswolds services centre in my constituency? Will he wish the centre his very best and assure it of its continued existence?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman has been in correspondence with me about the centre. We face a difficulty, because that excellent facility, which provides a first-class service, is underused. We have to consider how we best provide the range of services offered by the centre, which is used by personnel for several different reasons. We have to decide whether the centre is the most effective way of providing those services. As he knows, we are in consultation on the future of the centre and we are considering how we can best proceed. We are considering whether it should be a service base and assessing whether the service should necessarily be provided from a particular centre. None of that in any way detracts from the excellent work that is undertaken by the staff there, but we have to consider whether the facility is the most effective way of providing a necessary range of services.

If anybody doubts the case for joined-up government, or its effectiveness in action, they need look no further than the service families taskforce to see the real benefits that it is bringing. However, I recognise that there is still work to be done. Enabling someone to be given credit for time already spent on an NHS waiting list on moving to a new area has to be balanced against the clinical needs of those already on the waiting list in the new area. Enabling the portability of child-minding registration—a matter that has been raised with us—has created understandable concerns about whether child safety might

[Mr. Spellar]

be compromised. The taskforce is continuing to work on these and other problems, but their successful resolution will take a little time.

Retaining our personnel remains an issue on which we need to do more. It is not easy, as we all recognise, to persuade people to stay in the armed forces once they have made the decision to go. We know that many of those who have left in recent times have done so not because they no longer wish to serve their country, but because they are no longer willing to put up with the pressure that their career places on their families. We must recognise that some of that pressure is inevitable; it goes with the job and it is not something we can change. However, we can do much and we can do more to mitigate the consequences. Of course, we do not want to lose people when we have made a considerable investment in time and money training and developing them and when they still have much to offer.

We have taken action to encourage people to serve longer. That action is not just for those deployed on operations; it also supports their families. We have already increased the allowances for separated service to acknowledge and reward those individuals who have experienced the greatest separation. Those who suffer more than 280 days paid separation in a two-year period will receive a £1,000 bonus, and those who are separated for more than 365 days will get £2,000. We have already reduced the qualifying periods for those allowances and, as part of this year's pay deal, increased the daily rates at which they are paid. For families, we have introduced improvements and greater flexibility in the concessionary travel scheme, so that families based overseas can have more choice of how they return to the UK; for instance, they can now use Eurostar.

For the longer term, we are looking at a number of ways to encourage people to serve longer. They range from addressing sources of irritation identified by services personnel themselves—such as accommodation—to considering the provision of incentives, financial and others, to continue a services career.

In the latter category, our learning forces initiative is providing recognised, highly sought-after skills and qualifications. We have also introduced targeted schemes. Currently, 3,500 personnel are in Kosovo and 3,300 are in Bosnia-Herzegovina—although the latter figure will drop to about 2,000 by the end of this year. As well as contributing to the maintenance of peace and stability and to the building of democracy in the region, we are enabling our personnel to train. In Croatia, the Army has established a theatre education centre in Split to provide education services to personnel deployed in the area. The RAF has installed IT-based learning facilities at stations and detachments in the Gulf, Italy and Bosnia. Last year, when I visited Cosford, many of the personnel who had used those facilities told me that they had found them extremely useful.

Our efforts do not stop there.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The Minister said that, in addition to enforcing peace and stability in former Yugoslavia, our forces there are being given the opportunity to train. Will he confirm that our Challenger 2 tanks deployed in that area have no training ammunition at present? They have only war ammunition, which cannot be used in training as it contains depleted uranium. The forces are unable to undergo training—an extremely important matter for our armed services.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman may have misunderstood my remarks. I was making a point about individual training and education programmes. We are providing facilities for our forces to undertake such programmes. I was not, in this instance, referring to the military training described by the hon. Gentleman. As the hon. Gentleman correctly points out, and as I mentioned earlier in my speech, operations can be detrimental to the broader training required by our people. We need to find a balance; that is why we have introduced the initiatives that I described earlier.

As I was saying, my right hon. Friend announced on 22 February that we had completed development of the armed forces overarching personnel strategy. That will provide a coherent framework within which we can develop policies that will allow us to recruit and retain the best and brightest that society has to offer.

That new approach, which is currently being introduced across the armed forces, will allow us to identify issues of concern to services personnel and to address them before they become major disincentives to service life.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Previously, we were told that it was hoped to achieve the full manning target for the Army by 2004. The date has been revised and has now slipped to 31 March 2005. Will the Minister confirm that and comment on it?

Mr. Spellar: The date was 2005. We have been moving towards more positive figures for the Army. Although they are not yet satisfactory, fortunately they are rising. As I have been pointing out, we need to achieve the right balance between recruitment—last year, it was at its best for about 10 years—and translating initial recruitment into trained personnel. We have been refining our procedures for that, especially on fitness training, so that we lose fewer people during the build-up. We are not compromising on standards for the completion of training; we are doing more building up for several reasons—not least the reduction in sport in schools over several years. We are also incorporating the measures on retention that I outlined. That has resulted in a positive balance, although I acknowledge that the figure is not yet satisfactory. The trend is in the right direction, however.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): We all welcome the initiatives that the Government have introduced to help to deal with our inheritance from the Conservative Government—the huge shortfall in establishment in all the services. Is my hon. Friend a little concerned that, because of the Government's success on employment—800,000 new jobs during the past three years and employment rising every day—our job will be more difficult in future years?

Mr. Spellar: It is a great tribute to our training and recruitment teams that, in the face of a substantial increase in employment throughout most of the country, we have been able to achieve substantial recruitment figures. Traditionally, high employment has had an impact on retention, and it still does. That is why we need to try

harder to do away with many of the irritants in service life, for both service personnel and their families, to sustain retention in the face of attractive employment prospects, especially among those qualified to work in the telecommunications industry.

We are looking ahead to the challenges of tomorrow, not only on the world stage, but in the lives of our people. The armed forces overarching personnel strategy epitomises our approach to joined-up government. For the first time, the armed forces collectively have a coherent, overarching strategy within which to develop their personnel policies.

Talking of the need to recruit, figures to date indicate that nearly 25,000 people have joined the armed forces in the past 12 months: that is 96 per cent. of our target for the year. More than 3,000 of those recruits are women. However, we acknowledge that we have a way to go before we have armed forces that are sufficiently representative of our society.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): The first year in which there were Government-set targets for the recruitment of members of ethnic minority communities has just ended, on 31 March. Does my hon. Friend have the figures for the year, and did the armed forces meet the target set for them?

Mr. Spellar: We fell slightly short of the targets, but were well ahead on the numbers of the previous year. The ethnic recruitment team is doing a tremendous job. I hope that, like many hon. Members, my hon. Friend has met the members of that team as they go around the country, putting across our message in a highly effective way to youngsters, many of whom have had no previous contact with the armed forces. As I often say, however much Ministers say about the opportunities available to youngsters from the ethnic communities, nothing is more effective than a member of that community in our uniform putting across our message. That is why recruitment is increasing among youngsters from ethnic communities and why many personnel from ethnic communities are moving up through promotion.

Mr. Brazier: Will the Minister for the Armed Forces bear it in mind that one of his own hon. Friends, the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra), served in the Indian Army during the last war? It might be worth giving him some prominence, so as to reach back across the generations and influence grandmothers and grandfathers who still have a say in encouraging youngsters to join up.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of speaking to those who have influence in the community as part of our effort to persuade youngsters that the armed forces offer a good career. We want to send the message that many members of the ethnic communities who now live in this country have previously served in the armed forces. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments, and he will be pleased to learn that, at the reception for the Royal Navy held the other day, Commander Manchanda of the ethnic minorities recruitment team had a long conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra) about involving him in the team's work in west London.

We have some way to go before we reach the numbers required, but we are determined to continue our efforts to attract into the armed forces the brightest and the best, whatever their gender, ethnic origin or social background. I am pleased to say that we offer taster days for young women in the armed forces and the MOD civil service to show them the exciting opportunities that are available. Finally, to return to the theme of modernising our approach, the armed forces are dramatically increasing their use of the internet as a recruiting mechanism. I hope to report further to the House on our success in this regard.

I do not have time today to list all the measures that we are taking to improve the lives and careers of our forces. I know that in his closing speech this evening, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence will address some of the measures on which I have only touched, in particular improvements to service accommodation, which we recognise is a longstanding and legitimate grievance of both married and, as was rightly stressed earlier, single personnel.

The measures that I have mentioned demonstrate, as I am sure the House will agree, how much we—the Government and the House—value all our defence personnel, and show what we are doing to help them to continue to perform their job, which they do so magnificently for our people and our country.

2 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): I start by thanking the Minister for the Armed Forces for a very good annual report. It was a lot better than this year's defence White Paper, and a lot more fun, too. We start on a good note—it was a good speech, if I may say so.

Since we last debated armed forces personnel, a great deal has happened, and much of it has been good. Inevitably in these debates, we concentrate on problems and challenges, though the Minister of course presented an up-beat report. It is important to remember that most of the time, most armed forces personnel and their dependants are doing a superb job, usually—in spite of everything—pursuing a challenging life style and enjoying a high quality of life. I agree with the Minister about that.

I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends hope to raise a number of issues. Between us, we will draw to the House's attention facts that Ministers will find less palatable, but which they cannot ignore.

It is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) in his place. I look forward to his contribution from the perspective of Ulster.

I would be remiss not to point out that in spite of the new constitutional relationships with Scotland, there is not a single member of the Scottish National party present, even though this Parliament continues to have responsibility for defence in Scotland.

I remind Ministers that, this year, the Ministry of Defence faces a real-terms percentage budget cut since 1998–99 of 3.8 per cent. Furthermore, the 1999–2000 winter supplementary estimates noted that the MOD's departmental expenditure limit after the first six months of the year was running 4.3 per cent. ahead of forecast. If that continues unchecked for the entire financial year, it could result in an overspend of £950 million.

[Mr. Robert Key]

The Select Committee on Defence was told that the additional costs of Kosovo operations falling on last year's budget were likely to be almost £400 million. Even if that were met from the capital reserve, it would still leave a significant margin to be clawed back by the Department in order to avoid breaching its cash limit.

The strategic defence review settlement was based on achieving 3 per cent. a year cumulative efficiency improvements over the four years to 2001-02. That means £500 million worth of new efficiency measures every year. We are told that that has been achieved, but the Defence Committee concluded:

> We cannot be expected to believe the MOD's assurances that these measures are genuine efficiency savings, and not cuts, until it produces this evidence. A year-on-year programme of efficiency savings can have a debilitating effect at all levels of command and can be destructive to the quality of life that will sustain retention in the armed forces.

The Committee concluded that

> if the wheels have not yet come off the SDR, they are certainly beginning to wobble alarmingly. . . Commitments and resources have to be brought back into line, or we risk finding ourselves stumbling from one crisis to the next.

The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has taken into account recruitment, retention and motivation of the armed forces and has recommended an increase in basic military salary of 3.3 per cent. for all ranks, with the exception of privates, lance corporals, captains and lieutenants, who should receive 3.8 per cent. An increase of 1 per cent. in the X factor is also recommended.

That means an additional cost to the defence budget of £260 million, which must be met within existing departmental expenditure limits. Will armed forces personnel be better off in real terms, or will the increases once again be swallowed up by rising messing charges and rents?

Air Marshal Pledger, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Personnel), told the Defence Committee that the attitude surveys of people leaving the armed forces showed that operational tempo was the main reason for people wishing to leave. The adjutant-general confirmed that overstretch and undermanning remain top of the list. There is a 5 per cent. shortage of personnel on Royal Navy ships, which are already lean manned. That must have an effect on education, individual and team training, and drills.

The Army has an agreed period of 24 months for tour intervals, yet no Army units achieve that. The Royal Engineers and the Royal Signals have tour intervals of seven months and six months respectively. In the Army, nights out of bed have accounted for as much as 31 per cent. of the time. That assessment did not cover the period of highest commitment last summer.

The position remains critical in the Royal Air Force, which is 95 fast-jet pilots under strength. Ministers have failed to explain how they plan to reverse that dangerous downward spiral.

Mr. Brazier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech. The devastating figure that he has cited for pilots is underlined by the fact that, unlike many other industries, the aviation industry is currently depressed and airlines are not recruiting large numbers of pilots. It is difficult to imagine what will happen when there is an upturn in recruiting.

Mr. Key: My hon. Friend is right. I am the first to acknowledge that Ministers have a difficult task. Last year, when I accompanied the Minister's predecessor to Corsica and Italy to visit Royal Air Force personnel at the end of the Kosovo conflict, it was clear that they felt that they had achieved all that they could hope to do. One unit had carried out 900 bombing missions between 16 pilots in four months. The personnel said that they would never do that again. It is true that there are great temptations in the civilian world, but Ministers must decide how they will reverse the downward spiral.

The naval service is 1,900 short in trained strength; the Army is 5,600 short and the RAF is 1,200 short. I am the first to congratulate the Army on a substantial improvement in recruitment, but retention remains a serious problem. My worst fears were confirmed this week in an answer to a parliamentary question in which Ministers revealed the gravity of the position of the Scottish regiments. They are undermanned by approximately 600 people. That is the equivalent of a whole Scottish regiment, given that those regiments are mostly battalion strength. It is bad news for Scotland as well as the United Kingdom. That underlines my earlier point that Scottish National Members should be here, participating in the debate.

Mr. Dalyell: The hon. Gentleman makes that point for the second time. I do not want to make a yah-boo point against Scottish National Members, but never a week goes by without their defence spokesmen sending letters from the Mound that make pronouncements on defence policy. The problem is that they believe that defence policy belongs to the Holyrood Parliament.

Mr. Key: The hon. Gentleman is right. However, I am a Unionist and I believe strongly in the Union between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I endorse the hon. Gentleman's points by drawing attention to the extent to which the civilian work force at Faslane resent Scottish Nationalists' absurd obsession with a separate defence policy.

An especially worrying consequence of undermanning and overstretch is the rising divorce rates for couples of which at least one spouse is in one of the three services. Since 1990, the divorce rate has risen in the Army from 1.8 per cent. to 2 per cent.; in the Royal Navy, from 3.7 per cent. to 3.8 per cent., and in the Royal Air Force from 2.9 per cent. to 3.4 per cent. Those increases may not seem especially startling, but in the same period, the figures for the civilian population have fallen from 1.25 per cent. to 1.07 per cent. The RAF therefore has a divorce rate that is nearly three times as high as the civilian average.

Sometimes there are major problems. More often, the details of daily living cause the most friction. Friction at home occupies the mind of the service man or woman on the front line. That is why it is right to raise such issues while acknowledging our pride in the success of our armed forces personnel.

It therefore genuinely mattered when the Defence Housing Executive announced that it would cut the £2 million that was assigned for the purchase of carpets

and curtains for married quarters. It mattered to service families out of all proportion to the sum saved to the defence budget, as the Army Families Federation has told us. A much bigger problem arose as a bad example of overstretch when the tour intervals for a commando gunner became meaningless because he was posted overseas five times in only two years, during which his eight-year-old daughter attended seven schools. That is just not on.

Although statistics always lag behind events, the serious divorce level among Territorial Army families is becoming apparent. Wives are proud of their TA menfolk, but with 2,800 TA members serving overseas—in spite or perhaps because of the 18,000 cut in TA strength—unreasonable strains are being put on marriages. The Army Families Federation is not alone in looking after the interests of those who follow the flag. I pay particular tribute to Airwaves—the Association of RAF Wives—whose patron is the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) and which recently held a highly successful annual conference at the Royal British Legion college at Tidworth.

We are all relieved and delighted that RAF wives and dependants are building a successful and professional support organisation. RAF families are inevitably spread wide and thin across the United Kingdom and overseas, and need all the support that they can get. May I make a particular plea for armed forces personnel in Cyprus? I hope that Ministers will press their colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food over passports for pets for service personnel serving there—Cyprus has particular problems—and elsewhere, in particular Germany.

Also supporting the whole military community at garrison level are the Army welfare services. I pay particular tribute to them. Their budgets are being constantly squeezed by Land Command as the defence budget continues to be cut. Every garrison produces its newsletter, but I pay particular tribute to those who produce "Drumbeat", the Tidworth, Netheravon and Bulford community newsletter, which has run for 35 issues. This substantial source of supportive information contains everything from the times of church services and news on the citizens advice bureau, Relate and family entertainments to Defence Housing Executive and police news, holiday activities and rubbish recycling information.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I am most interested in my hon. Friend's remarks about "Drumbeat". I am sure that he is about to mention the "Aldershot Garrison Herald"—a marvellous publication that occasionally reports my speeches in the House, I am pleased to say.

Mr. Key: There is an idea for "Drumbeat". I shall give way to any hon. Member who has recently read his garrison magazine.

I mentioned the RBL training centre, and any consideration of forces personnel must include the RBL's amazing work. It not only looks after former service men and women, but firmly looks to the future and plays an important role, particularly through its training college, in the education and training of those who are about to leave or have left the forces. The RBL has always been about more than poppy day and we owe it not only our thanks and admiration, but our support for its future role.

We should not blame our armed forces personnel or their families if they ask, as they do increasingly, "What is it all for?" General Sir Mike Jackson, Commander-in-Chief, Land Forces spoke about that at last week's excellent Ministry of Defence seminar at the Royal United Services Institute on the future of defence training and education. I am grateful to the Minister of State for inviting me to attend. With characteristic bluntness, General Jackson reminded us that, in the final analysis, a member of Her Majesty's forces knows that it is kill or be killed. In those circumstances, he said, education is all very well, but what is needed are qualifications for the after life.

General Jackson reminded us that British forces need physical, moral and conceptual training that will equip them with an ability to make sensible judgments in deserts and in the Arctic, in towns and cities and in jungles, with allies who speak, train and think differently. Service men must make judgments in the public eye, in the dark, under chemical attack and under attack from the air. British service men and women have to operate in three dimensions. They must handle fear. They must know how to react when they make mistakes. They usually find themselves with insufficient information and maximum disinformation.

Professional forces are a permanent target for deception. They must be highly technical. They face endless intricate requirements for co-ordination with unreliable communications. They will be pitted against a highly intelligent foe. They must make their judgments within the law. Service men and women know that the hardest part is not the physical, but the psychological. As von Clausewitz said, in wartime operations even the easiest things are very difficult.

For our professional forces, day-to-day friction is inevitable. On operations, there will always be uncertainty and chaos, violence and danger and a great deal of human stress. General Jackson made it clear that the course of education and training on which the Ministry of Defence has embarked is for everyone at every level, from general national vocational qualification to higher education. As I added, it should also be for forces families and dependants, and for civilian Ministry of Defence employees. The Ministry has set itself a huge challenge. Last week's seminar was an early point in the process, which Conservative Members warmly endorse. We shall do our bit by keeping the Ministry up to the mark on behalf of our service men and women and their dependants and civilian personnel.

Are the members of Her Majesty's forces different? Do we want Her Majesty's forces to reflect British society? Before 1997, the agenda of political correctness was creeping up on the military, but there was no enthusiasm for it. In the past three years, some of the eight Ministers who have served in the Ministry of Defence have, with their political advisers, been more keen than others, but it is unquestionably true that Ministers now welcome the correctness agenda.

United States forces are ahead of us, of course. President Bill Clinton's agenda has been to build an army whose diversity of race and gender makes it look like America. As *The Sunday Times* told us last weekend, on American bases special exercise classes are held for pregnant soldiers. Training standards have been lowered. The obstacle course at one base has been renamed a confidence course so as not to intimidate women.

[Mr. Key]

Men must be able to throw a grenade 35 m, while women can pass muster by tossing it over a concrete wall. A new book on women in the armed forces by Stephanie Gutmann, "The Kinder, Gentler Military", has raised hackles in the Pentagon. The author writes:

> When we are involved again in a real war the fiercer, angrier, most blood-lusting force will win . . .

and that is not a description of America's new age army.

Do we want such an Army, Navy and Air Force for Britain and is it inevitable that we will get them? The passage of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill through the House and the other place has shown the irresponsible attitude of Ministers. There was no attempt to justify the wholesale weakening of the chain of command and no attempt to answer the fundamental questions put by Conservative Members or, indeed, by noble and gallant peers of no political persuasion in the other place.

With the qualification that, on our return to office, we shall ask the chiefs of staffs to review the impact on operational effectiveness of the change of rules on homosexuals in the forces, we warmly welcome the introduction of the new tri-service disciplinary code, which judges all personal behaviour in all three services against the overriding criterion of operational effectiveness.

Another landmark publication, after many years of work at the adjutant-general's headquarters, is the excellent new document "Values and Standards of the British Army". It is worth reminding the House of the foreword by the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Roger Wheeler:

> The Army is proud of our achievements and our reputation for excellence, none of which would be possible without the commitment, drive, courage and quality of our men and women. These Values and Standards have been developed to underpin our ethos, and formally to codify the standards of conduct essential to sustain the moral component of fighting power. They have to be more than just a form of words; they must be comprehensive yet understandable, inspiring rather than threatening, contemporary yet enduring, underpinning combat effectiveness yet morally defensible, and above all robust enough to sustain us in war. They also form the basis of a covenant between the Army and its soldiers rather than a set of commandments . . .

Paragraph 11, in the section on the Army's core values and selfless commitment, states:

> Soldiers volunteering for the British Army accept that, by putting the needs of the Service before their own, they will forego some of the rights enjoyed by those outside the Armed Forces. But in return they can at all times expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as an individual, and to be rewarded by reasonable terms and conditions of service.

Paragraph 15, in the section on discipline, states:

> Because discipline is so vital to success on operations, commanders must be able to enforce it when necessary. That requires clearly understood rules and a military legal system which can deal with offences such as absence, desertion or insubordination which are not found in civil law. And if it is to work in war, such a system must be in place in peace, for it cannot be turned on and off at will.

A parallel document, "Core Values and Standards in the Royal Air Force", conveys a similarly powerful message.

Those sentiments are wholly right. Long may they continue to have precedence over the tone of the arguments advanced by Defence Ministers during the passage of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill.

Mr. Cohen: May I return the hon. Gentleman to his argument about political correctness? His party took a politically correct line in saying that people who had been in prison or had a criminal record should not be allowed to join the forces. That was the position taken by Opposition Front Benchers just a few months ago.

Some people with criminal records might prove ideal to serve in the armed forces. They are probably very fit, and in any event they deserve a second chance. Has the hon. Gentleman's party changed its politically correct stance?

Mr. Key: I am glad to report that the hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong. He and I met at a briefing at 8.15 this morning, and we should have had a word about the matter then, but I assure him that that is not the line of the official Opposition. I am the first to say that people who have served their time and paid their debt to society make very fine soldiers, sailors and airmen, and always have. I am reminded of the recruiting sergeant whose first duty on Monday mornings was to attend the magistrates court to do little deals behind the scenes to assist the magistrates—recruiting straight from the cells, or rather straight from the court. I am sure that that did a great deal of good all round.

Let me say something about the importance of the Royal Military Police and the Ministry of Defence police. When I was in Kosovo last autumn, I was hugely impressed by the fantastic response of the Royal Military Police to the seemingly hopeless prospects of a country without civilian police, without effective law, without courts and with growing disorder. The RMP rose to the occasion, even running the only prison outside Pristina in which civilians could be locked up, often for their own good.

Back home in the United Kingdom, the RMP will now have to adjust their ways and accept an increased burden following the passage of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. They will have to be more sensitive in handling potentially disruptive personal and sexual situations, and they will be constrained as a result of new human rights legislation; but I know that, again, they will rise to the occasion.

The Ministry of Defence police continue to face an uncertain future. Downsizing of the force has been delayed, not least to allow 60 officers to train for service in Kosovo, where they will complement the work of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. We wish them well.

I hope that Ministers will make swift progress in agreeing with the Home Office an extension of the MOD police's jurisdiction, so that they can exercise their constabulary powers beyond the immediate vicinity of MOD property. That would improve their efficiency considerably, and would also give MOD police officers protection if they encountered an incident in which they should properly intervene. MOD police personnel have been professional and very patient in the face of the introduction of other police units to carry out less demanding guard functions. They deserve a period of stability.

Today we heard of the theft of guns from the Royal Artillery at Larkhill in Wiltshire. I know that the MOD police have risen to the occasion: they are working closely with the Wiltshire county constabulary, with a joint control room and the use of a police helicopter. I am sure

that, when the incident has been fully evaluated and the crime has been solved, there will be lessons to be learned. One of those lessons will be how important it is for the MOD police and, indeed, the Royal Military Police to interact constructively with Home Office constabulary—which they largely and increasingly successfully do.

We all want to see better retention and much more recruitment. We all want to have the best-trained forces in the world, and we know that we have the most highly motivated forces in the world. So what threats does our nation face that might send our forces into action?

The first problem is that most of our forces are trained for high-intensity warfare, but find themselves in peace-enforcement or peacekeeping roles. They are very good at that, but it would be a grave mistake not to train to the standards required for high-intensity warfare. Our forces can operate at a peacekeeping level so long as their training for high-intensity operations is maintained; if it is not, we are all in trouble. The defence budget is having an impact on training, and I hope that Ministers will monitor it closely.

It is important for the inquiry into improvements at the Otterburn ranges to turn out the right way. There will be a serious negative impact if the Army is not allowed to train on those ranges in the way that is necessary.

Most other NATO forces are not nearly as well equipped or well trained as our forces. That makes any joint action more difficult, and also underlines the absolute imperative of maintaining the highest standards of training and reducing overstretch so that training does not go by default. Given the level of overstretch, however, the role of the Territorial Army and the reserves in other forces continues to become more and more important. A new call-out order was made only last week under section 54 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 so that members of the reserve forces can continue to support operations in the former Yugoslavia and the Gulf area. Only volunteers will be called out. However, we know that during the Kosovo conflict last year Ministers got within a few days of compulsory mobilisation of the TA to sustain peace support operations in the Balkans.

Compulsory mobilisation would have been legal under section 54 of the 1996 Act. Of course, the Secretary of State would also need to be satisfied that such a mobilisation could be justified in policy and political terms. As the Chief of the General Staff said in his advice to the Secretary of State last December, there was potential for such a mobilisation to be linked to regular Army undermanning, and therefore to be subject to adverse comment. It could also resurrect the debate about whether the TA reductions should have been delayed until the Army was fully manned. Then there was the question of the risk of employer appeal, which was assessed to be about 20 per cent. of the total number mobilised. The risk of individual appeal was put at no more than 15 per cent.

Perhaps the most extraordinary part of the advice to the Secretary of State concerned funding. The additional cost to the defence budget of the mobilisation of the preferred units of specialist engineers and a composite logistics squadron would have been £3.5 million, for which no provision existed at the time. That was, however, one of the three elements in the package of proposals aimed at alleviating the effect of overstretch on the armed forces, which was being discussed with the Treasury at the time. But this is the killer issue: any decision to mobilise would have to depend on agreement by the Treasury to meet the additional costs involved. That was the advice of the Chief of the General Staff. For the very first time, and under a Labour Government, the Ministry of Defence has not the financial headroom to call out 20 specialist engineers for a year and a logistics squadron of 100 for six months, without the prior permission of the Treasury. That really is a first for Labour.

Incidentally, would Defence Ministers have a word with the Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers about support for the reserve forces among chief constables? While some chief constables—in Hampshire, for example—are very supportive of the reserves, others are alleged to be totally unsupportive. I am told that that applies in Essex. Some chief constables have difficulty in persuading their police authorities to be supportive—for example, in the west midlands and Northumbria—and are therefore unable to be outwardly supportive themselves. The Government expect private sector employers to support a relevant and usable reserve; it is unfortunate, to say the least, that there is inconsistency in that respect in the public sector.

Compulsory mobilisation, even of small units, is a lengthy process. Had Ministers decided on compulsory mobilisation of the TA so that the forces were deployed in the Balkans next month, a ministerial decision and announcement would have been needed by early January at the latest, according to the Chief of the General Staff. Given those substantial time lags, how do the Ministry of Defence and British military units assess their future activities? It is the Government's duty to assess as accurately as possible—even to predict—things that might go wrong in the world which would affect Britain's national interests. To achieve that, the Government must listen to what is happening.

The less said about the defence intelligence services and Government communications headquarters the better—only because they are fantastically successful organisations, and are best left to get on with their work quietly. I wish instead to comment on two aspects of predictions by the Government, particularly the Ministry of Defence, on future activity.

Defence policy is supposed to be led by foreign policy. The MOD rightly points out that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office failed to predict the Falklands war, the Gulf war and the Balkans conflict. At our embassies all over the world a great deal of very professional work is being achieved, but things seem to be a little slower at the Whitehall end.

In December 1999, the FCO invited all its embassies around the world to use their local knowledge to predict likely civil wars, insurrection and disturbances. The FCO in London expected nine positive responses. Our embassies sent to London a list of 53 trouble spots.

Permanent Joint Headquarters at Northwood has also identified 50 to 60 potential operations that might be needed over the next two years. The key operations remain Bosnia, Kosovo, northern Iraq, southern Iraq, East Timor and the Caribbean drug problem. However, the number of potential operations identified has severe implications for overstretch and equipment in the forces and in terms of the defence budget.

[Mr. Key]

We keep coming back to the vital point: the Government cannot continue cutting the defence budget without adjusting the commitments of our forces. There is a credibility problem; there is a credibility problem with Ministers themselves.

Mr. John Smith: The hon. Gentleman has made two or three references to the budget. For the sake of the House, will he clarify whether it is his party's position to increase the defence budget? If it is, by how much would it increase it and where would the money come from?

Mr. Key: I seem to remember that question being regularly asked when we were in government and when we questioned Labour Members. They will have to wait and see. The hon. Gentleman will enjoy the suspense, but I assure him that we will not seek to have commitments and budget unmatched, as they are now. It is not worth the candle of the strain that it is putting on our armed forces.

As I say, there is a credibility problem with Ministers. During the recent passage of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill, it emerged that the Ministers driving through that fundamental change to the courts martial process had never been to a court martial in session. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence visited the Colchester glasshouse during our proceedings. We were glad about that.

Then we had the astonishing statement from the Secretary of State that metal bashing is no longer a vital national asset. It does make us wonder whether any Ministers have actually sat inside an AS90 or Warrior—I have—in which armed forces personnel train and use their professional skills as a matter of course. Metal bashing has a whole new dimension for them.

Metal bashing also seems important for the thousands of shipyard workers on the Clyde. I reassure the Clyde work force that I have visited those shipyards. I was incredibly impressed by the world-beating technology that is now the norm on the Clyde. That shows that some of our most traditional industries can adapt successfully to take on the world. It is deeply patronising of the Secretary of State to write off the employees of Scottish shipyards in that way.

I have visited the superb shipyard at Barrow-in-Furness that is producing the finest submarines in the world. For a Royal Navy submariner who is submerged for many weeks in defence of our democracy, metal bashing certainly seems important and is beyond question a vital national asset. I have also visited BAE Systems at Broughton, where 21st century aircraft metal bashing is beyond doubt a national asset.

As Danny Carrigan, Scottish Regional Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union, said yesterday:

> If MOD Civil Servants spin against Govan, we will continue to battle for Govan.

Ministers should not be surprised if the Clydeside trade union starts to spin against the Labour party in Scotland. We are talking about a multi-million pound contract for roll on/roll off ferries. I agree with the general secretary of the GMB union, Mr. Edmonds, that Nelson would be turning in his grave.

I have said that it is the duty of government to make assessments of what might go wrong in future and to listen to what is happening daily. Those are both functions of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. However, the other great unsung hero in defence of Britain's national interest is the BBC's monitoring unit at Caversham.

The BBC World Service is respected throughout the world, its audiences are increasing and it is meeting the challenges of new technology. There will always be a place for crackly, short-wave broadcasting. However, the World Service is increasingly widely available on local FM frequencies and online on the world wide web, as well as on satellite television.

The BBC is respected because it is independent of our state apparatus and because of the speed and accuracy of its news reporting. To achieve that, both national and World Service programmes depend not only on foreign correspondents, but on the 400 or so dedicated journalists and engineers, surviving on a tiny budget, at Caversham park.

Twenty-four hours a day, native language speakers listen to broadcasts throughout the world and make editorial judgments about the importance of some very obscure broadcasts. They nearly always get it right. It is not a secret service; it is not national propaganda. It is the epitome of fundamental freedom in a mature democracy. Almost all the information gathered is disseminated or archived. It is accessible throughout the world online.

When I visited the establishment only last week, it was extraordinary to talk to journalists in one of the original rooms, which was set up during the second world war, and to read the original typed records of wartime broadcasts—I dipped into the 1943 papers—while computer screens carried online information for assessment by a team of journalists.

I am glad to report that the Ministry of Defence routinely accesses that information, often not needing to wait for BBC interpreters because so many armed forces personnel are now expert linguists. The MOD demands and gets instant access to hour-by-hour information on the world's hot spots. I gather that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office prefers paper translations delivered by post a couple of days later.

Although I deplore the extravagance and crazy prioritising in some parts of the BBC, I salute the work of BBC Monitoring and its contribution to the security of our nation. Its total annual budget is under £20 million. Its two biggest customers are the MOD and the FCO, at about £7.5 million each, followed by the BBC World Service at £4.3 million. The MOD should resist the temptation to cut that vital contribution to the work of BBC Monitoring, which provides outstanding value for money.

We warmly support the Army's decision to require all units to take part in road safety training after the recent rise in fatal traffic accidents. Several years ago, I raised the question of military vehicle accident rates. I know that the Master Driver has taken the issue seriously. Please can the Minister, in his winding-up speech, clarify a recent statement by a Ministry of Defence spokeswoman, who claimed that accidents involving MOD personnel are below the national average? That directly conflicts with statistics that were published only a couple of years ago.

I declare my interest as president of the Salisbury Plain branch of the Institute of Advanced Motorists, which has a significant membership among Her Majesty's forces in

the area. We should all remember that it is usually drivers who cause accidents. Adverse weather conditions or poor engineering can also be to blame, but, more often, accidents are caused by young, inexperienced drivers, by inadequate training of drivers for the vehicle in question or, indeed, by inappropriate use of vehicles.

Therefore, we are glad that the defence road safety committee is taking such a serious line. Please will Ministers report to the House with an assessment of the benefits to the military of participation in road safety week at the beginning of May?

Another aspect of safety and personal security, which I must ask the Minister to address, concerns retired personnel, from both the military and the civil service. We expect military staff to be vigilant and to take appropriate precautions for their personal security. When they retire, they should reasonably expect anonymity and privacy. Therefore, I was alarmed when I heard that a number of elderly retired MOD employees have been approached at home by aggressive investigative journalists in connection with work that they did many years ago. That has happened to six of my constituents.

I understand that the names of retired personnel have been obtained by trawling through the papers that are available under the 30-year rule from the Public Record Office. There has been no attempt to delete the names of any of the people concerned. It is fair that Ministers and politicians abide by the 30-year rule, but I am doubtful whether Parliament or successive Governments ever intended that the names of individual employees should be disclosed in that way. There could be real hazards from more unscrupulous individuals and organisations.

Mr. Dalyell: Is the reference to the present investigation by Wiltshire police and Detective Superintendent Luckett of matters relating to Porton more than 30 years ago? If it is, there is another side to the story.

Mr. Key: It is not exclusively that. Some of the people have been approached with regard to that, but there are others who have been approached for other reasons and in connection with another investigation. It is an important problem and I ask Ministers to look at it sensitively.

Against all the odds, the professionalism, dedication and loyalty of armed forces personnel remain beyond question. The initial excitement and glamour of the strategic defence review has evaporated—indeed, it has left something of a hangover among the armed forces at all levels. The wives and families are still determined to follow the flag, but Ministers are on probation.

The Army Families Federation was pleased to hear that some of the £17 million withdrawn from the Defence Housing Executive budget has been put back and that Ministers have promised the earth by the end of 2005. Those Ministers should not be surprised that a degree of cynicism has crept in. The latest edition of "The Families Journal" asks:

> Is this a breakable promise or an achievable commitment?

Writing in "Defence Review", the Chairman the Select Committee on Defence, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), said:

> Fundamental to our ability to field armed forces which are among the best in the world is the quality of volunteers who make up those forces. The MOD has introduced several measures to improve the lives of our servicemen and women and more are to follow. But the critical problems of undermanning and overstretch have not been solved. Indeed, the situation has almost certainly deteriorated since the SDR. The next twelve months must bring signs of improvement.

We agree.

Her Majesty's Opposition remain wholly loyal to our armed forces personnel, to their wives and families, and to the thousands of people in the civil service and in other support operations. We shall continue to hold Ministers to account, uncomfortable as that may be for them. That is nothing less than our duty to the House and to Her Majesty's forces.

2.40 pm

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): As an ex-service man—a volunteer—and someone who has long felt a great debt of gratitude to our armed forces for the opportunities that they gave me as a young man from a very traditional blue-collar, working-class background, it is a particular pleasure for me to speak in this debate on our armed forces personnel. After the earlier exchanges on magistrates courts, I am reluctant to go into too much detail, but I do wish to express my gratitude to the armed forces. Our services have given tens of thousands of British youngsters not only a second chance, but perhaps their first opportunity to develop self-respect, self-confidence and self-discipline. We should never lose sight of the forces crucial role in providing such an opportunity to very many people in our community.

Another reason why it is always a privilege to speak in defence debates is that I have one of the United Kingdom's largest military bases in my constituency—RAF St. Athan, which is certainly the largest Royal Air Force base. The base also has a very popular journal—the "Tathan"—which I recommend to all hon. Members.

RAF St. Athan provides employment for more than 4,000 service and civilian personnel, making it the biggest employer in my constituency. Hon. Members with the privilege of having a large military establishment in their constituency should always be mindful of the contributions that they make. RAF St. Athan contributes more than £50 million annually to the local economy, supports as many as 10,000 jobs in and out of the area, and plays a very valuable role in our community.

Another reason why I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate is that, with other hon. Members, I have the privilege of being a member of the United Kingdom's delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. The assembly gives us an opportunity to get direct, first-hand feedback and to see the respect in which all three of our forces are held around the world. Regardless of where in the world the assembly meets—but especially when we speak to military personnel from other countries—people from those countries express their respect for our armed forces. That respect is both an asset for the United Kingdom and a great tribute to our forces personnel.

I should like to do three things in this debate, the first of which is to pay tribute to the role of our service men and women around the world.

Secondly, I should like to deal with the fact that morale in the forces underpins not only the problems of retention and recruitment, but the military's prospects. Morale is the key to our forces' success, and it should be given careful consideration.

[Mr. John Smith]

Thirdly, I should like to address some issues that directly affect our services personnel and their families. As an hon. Member with a large military establishment in my constituency, I realise that, although those issues are not always thought to be serious, they are becoming more numerous and reflect the changes in our society.

Wherever the delegation goes, we hear references to the British military. Not long ago, we were in the United States marine corps base, at Camp Pendleton, and saw the latest fighting techniques being developed to deal with the new threats confronting the world. The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) described our inability to predict future trouble spots, but that is precisely the problem—we cannot predict future trouble spots. The world and the security environment have changed so much in the past 10 years that we shall have to reconfigure our forces and other resources to deal with the unexpected, not with the old predictable threat across the iron curtain.

When I spoke to the US marines, I was most struck by the tributes that they paid to the British service men and women who had worked with them. They looked particularly to our special forces to learn how best to operate. It was not an isolated incident.

An all-nation, all-party group went to Turkey, to review the Turkish army's lead presidential regiments. What were their first comments to us? They wanted to recognise and pay tribute to the contributions made by the British forces. Many of their officers had trained alongside British personnel.

Perhaps the best example of the esteem in which our forces are held worldwide—from India and China to anywhere that one might care to mention—occurred two years ago, when I went with the delegation to Moscow. We had a morning off and were on Red square, outside Lenin's mausoleum—where people from across what is now the Russian Federation still come to queue up. Two cars pulled up, and four members of the Black Watch stepped out, in full dress uniform—presumably they had that Saturday morning off duty—carrying their pipes and dirks. They started to play their bagpipes.

We were in the heart of the old Soviet empire—outside the Kremlin, on Red square—but the Russian people immediately recognised the pipes and the Black Watch. Hundreds of them started drifting out of the queue to stand around our service men, to listen to them play. Spontaneously, they started clapping—much to the distress of the red guards guarding the tomb, who came over to try to stop that wonderful spectacle.

My experience on Red square showed me just what a great asset we have in our forces. As hon. Members have said in our defence debates, we have probably the best forces in the world, even if, sadly, they are now some of the smallest. But they are still the best. We should all recognise the role that they play for us, and the role played by the families who support them. The House should do whatever it can to continue offering support to all of them.

As a country, we should also recognise that our forces' professionalism and international recognition are not only a military, but a strategic and foreign policy asset for the United Kingdom. I sometimes think that we do not sufficiently exploit that great asset, although we should.

As I said, our forces' morale is crucial. We must continue to debate undermanning and overstretch, and we should not lose sight of the effect that they have on service families. That is not necessarily the most crucial issue, which is that our service men and women know that they are part of a professional and efficient force, that they are doing their job properly and that what they are doing is relevant to today's needs.

That is why it was disappointing to hear the hon. Member for Salisbury almost cast aside the strategic defence review. If there was something that needed to be done desperately when the Government came to power, it was to carry out a fundamental review of our military requirements for our armed forces' personnel.

It was becoming obvious that what our forces were doing was becoming increasingly irrelevant. There were understandable shortfalls, because nobody wanted to make the tough decisions about the reconfiguration of our forces to meet the new challenges. There were understandable misjudgments in terms of undermanning, the virtual absence of heavy lift and the collapse of the defence medical service. There were difficulties in terms of logistics for our forces in the field, and identifiable shortfalls were across the board. We could not maintain a large force in the front line because of the rundown. There was a 32 per cent. cut in real terms in defence expenditure at that time, so we will take no lessons from Conservative Members about defence spending.

Mr. Key: That canard has been running for three years now. If the hon. Gentleman sincerely believes what he says, why does he support continuing cuts?

Mr. Smith: We must provide services to meet our commitments throughout the world. This Government had the courage and vision to start to reconfigure those resources. We did that not to maintain the cold war warriors who were waiting for a Soviet invasion of western Europe—because that was what we were lumbered with. We needed a mobile force to react rapidly throughout the world to meet unpredictable problems, such as in Iraq and Kosovo.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The hon. Gentleman, in a typically lively speech, is wanting to have it both ways. He suggests that the Conservatives cut too far during the cold war—a view with which I have some sympathy—but then says that it is justifiable to cut further. He should not try to have his cake and eat it.

Mr. Smith: I made no attempt to justify any further cuts. The Government have asked the military—as they have asked everyone else—for efficiency savings. The figure is 3 per cent. over three years, compared with a 32 per cent. cut in real terms during the Conservatives' period of office.

Huge efficiencies can be made. I spent a little time in the Ministry of Defence when the review was taking place and we discovered all sorts of amazing things. For example, we had hundreds of horses stabled somewhere—presumably serving some core activity for the modern infantry and cavalry in 1998, one which I could not work out. We had trains lying in stock in mothballs throughout the country. No one had carried out a serious audit of the assets of the military in this country, even though those assets were gigantic. Do not tell me that there was not a duty on any Government to establish that the taxpayer was getting value for money.

I do not support further cuts in the defence budget, precisely because we live in an unpredictable world. The world may become more volatile, although all hon. Members will have been delighted to see that North and South Korea sat down recently, hopefully to push for some diplomatic solutions to the problems in that part of the world. The defence budget should be reviewed continually with that in mind.

Nothing did more for the morale of the service men and women than the strategic defence review. The professionals knew when what they were doing was irrelevant in the world and when what they did was making sense. They can switch from policing the streets of Pristina to engaging in full-scale battle in the middle east. That flexibility is one of the great strengths of our forces.

There is no greater tribute we could pay to our armed forces than to give them a clear direction of what their policy tasks are throughout the world. We must provide them with the resources to do their job properly, and clear policy commitments are needed. That is not what we had in 1997, or anything like it. Unfortunately, the Conservative party could not take the tough decisions that were required at the end of the cold war. There was a peace dividend, and we had to see some decline in defence budgets, as we have seen throughout Europe—although I am concerned that some countries in Europe have cut too far, given the international commitments of NATO.

Under the Tories, there was death by a thousand cuts. They sliced a bit off here and there, but they did not sit back and ask what was required. Nothing did more to damage the morale of armed forces personnel than those last few years of Conservative Government. I say that not only as a politician who has the privilege of representing a military base, but as an ex-service man.

I am not the only ex-service man in the House—unfortunately, the numbers are declining—but that gives me an insight into the way in which our service men and women think. There is nothing more important for them than to know that what they do counts and works. That was not happening under the Conservatives.

We have seen big improvements in morale, and if we carry out the next, more difficult stage—the full implementation of the strategic defence review—there will be further improvements. There have been problems of slippage and many of the much-needed changes have not taken place. As the process continues, morale will increase greatly.

During our visit to the States, we came across some interesting research by the Rand corporation on overstretch and tours of duty. There is pressure on families, and we must tackle their problems which are unlike those of families in the community. However, the research did not establish a correlation between increased tours of duty and retention in the forces. In fact, there was an indication that the opposite was the case; that our service men and women were proud to serve this country as often as they could. That can often lift morale and increase pride. As my hon. Friend the Minister rightly said, we need to get the balance right.

I am concerned about the day-to-day problems faced by our service personnel. I fear that the bureaucracy of the MOD and the traditional military culture make it difficult to solve simple problems, because something is against the rules or does not fit in with how we have done things before.

Service life and outlook are changing. As a young service man, I married a service woman 30 years ago and we started a family. Our priorities were different from today's. The services reflect what is happening in society. It is nonsense to think that the moral code can be frozen in time. To have an effective moral code and standards in the military, we need to keep ahead of the game. That is the secret. We must keep up with society at large. Values in the military are dramatically different from what they were 30 years ago or, as I know from my father's generation, 30 years before that.

The challenge is to maintain high, though changing, standards. Service families, by and large, do not want to live in married quarters. Increasingly, they want to buy their own home and allow their families to be more and more independent and mix with civilian families. We must see that as a challenge, not a threat. Increasingly, they want their children to go to local schools, and we must help to facilitate that.

I get a little worried about cases in which it appears that the intransigence of the military prevents us from making progress. I have written to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary about some of them. It is usually the wife or the mum—the head of the family in the home—and not the service man who comes to us.

Mrs. Bailey told me that her husband, Sergeant Bailey, at RAF St. Athan, volunteered to go on a final posting as a trainer in Brize Norton unaccompanied, which saves the force money. Their child had been supported at a day school for some time through the school fees scheme. At a critical point in the child's education, because of some RAF rule, the fact that Sergeant Bailey volunteered to go unaccompanied meant that the school fees were cut.

I know that the rule has been there for a long time, but it does not take account of the increasing trend of people wanting to settle outside married quarters. If we do not change, we will have even more trouble recruiting and retaining. We must focus on the detail of everyday family life.

Colette Howard, another service wife, chose to live in married quarters at RAF St. Athan. She was happy to move with her husband's postings and to set up home afresh every three or four years. The real source of the problem is the sale of MOD housing stock, which has been a minor disaster for service family life. She is now being moved from house to house within the married quarters at the station, presumably because of general policy decisions made in Whitehall. Havoc is being caused in the day-to-day life of service families.

There may be a temptation, in the wider debate, to dismiss such problems as trivial, but they could create difficulties in recruitment and retention. We have to tackle the smaller problems or we will lose more and more service families as values change.

I have had many opportunities to visit military establishments in my year at the Ministry of Defence and as a member of the NATO delegation. I remember reading that the Royal Marines had a problem with recruits, because they could not wear their boots. Half the youngsters had never worn a pair of shoes in their life: they had always worn trainers. Within a couple of days, the 17 and 18-year-olds were unable to walk. They could not even wear a pair of strong shoes.

The Marines had the good sense to say, "Hang on a minute, we've got a few months' notice, why don't we send the youngsters a pair of boots in the post and ask

[Mr. Smith]

them to go for a jog in the park in them each day?" What a difference it made. Nothing amazes me more than to see what those youngsters do for their country at the end of their training. The pride and self-esteem have not changed in the 30 years since I was in the services or the 60 years since my father was. That is the key. The best way of keeping that pride and high morale is to back our military at every opportunity.

It has been said that this country does not fully exploit the asset that we have. Alliances are changing, with the European defence identity complementing NATO, which is unquestionably the key alliance that has served us so well for so long. People sometimes make disparaging remarks about the changes. We were on the tail end of some disparaging remarks by the hon. Member for Salisbury when he went to Washington recently. I think that he did our forces and the country—as well as his party—a great disservice in the evidence that he gave to the Select Committee.

I have no doubt that we should be at the forefront of any debate about the future defence requirements of the European Union.

Our forces have the best reputation. They are the most professional and can undoubtedly make the best contribution. The best thing that we can do for our armed forces personnel is to ensure that during the debate about Europe we are at the forefront of developments, instead of being xenophobic and bashing anything to do with Europe because of internal party requirements. The British armed forces should be leading any developments that take place in Europe.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): The hon. Gentleman is referring to remarks by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), but I can assure him that the views expressed by my hon. Friend in the United States are shared by Congressmen and Senators. A lively debate is going on and should not be stifled. It has nothing to do with differences of opinion on Europe, but with the question of the alliance and how it should maintain its cohesiveness.

Mr. Smith: Much concern was expressed about the effect that the contribution in Washington has had on the whole debate on the future defence needs of Europe. Most importantly, it undermined this country's opportunity to ensure that our armed forces lead the way, as they have done in the past and as I am sure they will do for a long time in the future.

3.11 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) falls into that increasingly exclusive category of hon. Members who have actually served in the armed forces. Therefore when he speaks, as he has today with great sincerity and some passion, the House would do well to listen to what he has to say, especially about the change in attitude between the time when he first enlisted and today.

I confess to some reservations about the fact that we have abandoned the days of single service debates, and address these issues on the basis of a somewhat artificial split between personnel and procurement. Indeed, some of my reservations are confirmed by the light attendance in the House this afternoon. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of any one of the armed services without drawing together the issues of personnel and procurement. We are engaged in something of an experiment and I hope that it will be carefully reviewed. If it is concluded that we could better serve our responsibilities by going back to single service debates, I hope that the Government will be sympathetic to that view.

If I concentrate more on the Royal Air Force than on the other two services this afternoon, it is because I claim some front-line experience—if I may put it like that—of the RAF. Today's debate comes hard on the heels of a visit I made to RAF Leuchars in my constituency on Monday, by kind permission of Ministers. The future of that station is now assured because it is to be host in due course to three squadrons of Eurofighter, or Typhoon, as we must learn to call it.

On Monday, as on so many other occasions when I have met personnel from all three services, I was impressed by the professionalism and commitment of all those I met, from the station commander, Group Captain Peter Coker, down to the newest recruit. What was notable, in a station that has traditionally been associated with air defence, was an understanding at all levels of the changed environment in which the RAF has to operate and of the need to maximise deployability. The days of the RAF staying at home and going abroad only occasionally have long since gone. People understand and appreciate that the way in which the RAF fulfils its obligations will have to reflect that change.

The strategic defence review, which we debated, in part at least, only a few weeks ago, formally adopted an expeditionary strategy. However, that was no more than a theoretical recognition of what was already increasingly the practice. The word "expeditionary" in that context can easily—although not entirely—be reflected in the synonym "overseas". Our armed services have to have the means by which they can operate effectively overseas.

If an expeditionary strategy is to work, it needs to have the capacity for much more rapid deployment than we have previously had. Self-evidently, the effectiveness of personnel depends on the effectiveness and speed of their deployment. That is why a decision is urgently needed on the provision in the strategic defence review that the United Kingdom would acquire four C-17s or their equivalent. Debate is no doubt raging in the Ministry of Defence, and is certainly being carried on in national newspapers, with speculation falling on speculation.

I have three questions for the Minister on that issue. Is it the case that the Government intend to acquire not four aircraft but three, and not necessarily by outright purchase, while at the same time maintaining an interest in the airbus derivative with which British Aerospace is associated? What is the reason for delaying the decision? Has it anything to do with money and the Chancellor of the Exchequer? [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] Well, I am an innocent in such matters, as the House will appreciate. I ask merely for the purpose of better informing the debate.

A less urgent decision, but one that may be significant for the expeditionary strategy, is the question of the roll on/roll off ferries, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key). If the forces do not have those ferries, they may be able to get their personnel to

the area of deployment, but they will not able to transport the equipment necessary to sustain them when they get there.

It would be extreme short-termism to sacrifice shipbuilding capacity on the Clyde for a temporary financial gain, and I do not believe that we would have to break the law on competitive bidding in Europe for civilian projects. It must be feasible to put together a package of ownership, operation, crewing and command that would make those vessels legitimately military and not civilian. If they are military in nature, that does not preclude competition, but it entitles the Government to take into account issues other than price when making the decision. It would be foolish to rush into the wrong decision, and much better to take time to reach a decision that satisfies the defence requirement and maintains a viable shipbuilding capacity. If the Secretary of State did talk about metal bashing—I noticed that he shook his head when that remark was attributed to him—it would have been a short-sighted view. How are we going to get the type 45 if we have no metal-bashers around? How will we be able to build ships to meet our naval commitments if we do not have some of those who were dismissively described as metal bashers?

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is making a most important point about shipbuilding and European Union rules about intervention funding. Is not it the case that in matters of international defence we should not be hidebound by rules of that kind? The national interest should prevail, and that would be good for Scotland and for the country as a whole.

Mr. Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman knows well, the treaty of Rome makes provisions that have the effect of excluding defence from the matters that have to be dealt with as part of the common market. I do not believe that it would be impossible to find a package that would fulfil the criteria that I mentioned and place those vessels in the military category.

The hon. Gentleman raises the subject of Europe in one category, but it arises in another. The UK armed forces now rarely act on their own. If a European security and defence identity is successfully created, the opportunities—indeed, the obligations—for joint operations with European allies will increase. I can claim that there is no greater enthusiast in the House of Commons than myself for integration in defence in Europe within the framework of NATO. I also hope that those who have heard me in the past remember that I have never contemplated what is sometimes described as a European army.

I do not believe that any country can abandon sovereignty over its own armed forces and the responsibility for deciding when and if they go to war. However, a European security and defence identity, if successfully created, will have long-term consequences for personnel in our armed services. Indeed, it may have long-term consequences for the structure and composition of our armed services if force specialisation and interoperability are more widely adopted than they have been.

From the standpoint of the interests and the welfare of our armed services, I do not believe that a European security and defence identity will bear proper fruit unless it is capability led. Only a commitment to capability will provide comfort for those in the United States Congress—they have already been mentioned—who have expressed reservations. Indeed, only a fully capable security and defence identity will be able to fulfil the expectations attributed to it. Conversely, a weak or inadequate European security and defence identity would damage not merely Europe but NATO, too.

I reaffirm the fact that my support depends on capability, not architecture. I have more than a sneaking suspicion that if we get the capability right, the architecture will almost certainly follow. I am equally strongly of the view that the converse is by no means certain.

We cannot call on others to reach the necessary level of expenditure and commitment unless we are willing and able to do so ourselves. As part of that, we need a successful strategy for overstretch and undermanning. Sometimes, we talk of those as though they were two separate issues, but as the hon. Member for Salisbury clearly demonstrated, they are inextricably linked.

I do not take the view that the way to deal with that problem is always to reduce commitments. If one reduces commitments, there is a price to be paid—one may gain financially, but one may well lose political influence. My answer to those who ask, "What about expenditure?", is to say that senior budget holders in all three armed services will say that the so-called 3 per cent. efficiency saving is the element of the present financial regime that causes them the greatest grief. If the Government are serious about ensuring that our armed services have the financial support and equipment to deal with overstretch and undermanning, they could take a financial step that would be received with extraordinary gratitude and acknowledgement throughout the armed services, and bring an end to that so-called efficiency saving.

On 22 February, when we last debated these issues, the Minister for the Armed Forces told the House of the various theatres from which we were withdrawing forces. Withdrawals of that type make sense only if the integrity of missions is not compromised as a result. I hope that we will not fall into the trap of saying that we have done better because we have brought people back. Often, maintaining the number of personnel, or putting more in, will be necessary.

I have Kosovo in mind. As we know, the failure to provide adequate civil administration there has thrown much more weight on the military presence. I have referred before to the continuing scandal of the failure to provide sufficient civilian police. That failure not only has consequences for the numbers there, but increases the pressure on those who are there. One would be glad to know—not in detail, but in principle—that the Government have some contingency plans for what has been loosely described in other quarters as a "spring offensive" of those warring factions in Kosovo who have not yet been willing to settle down.

We have a significant military presence in about 24 countries. Not all of them are as dangerous and difficult as Kosovo, but they require long absences from home base, station or port, for members of all three services. On a Thursday afternoon, I hesitate to burden the House with too many statistics, but it is worth going back to the 24-month standard, which was referred to earlier. In the Royal Armoured Corps, the interval

[Mr. Campbell]

between operational tours in 1999–2000 is 12 months. In the Royal Artillery, it is 18 months, in the Royal Engineers, seven months, in the Royal Signals, six months, and in the infantry, 15 months. Anecdotally, it has been said that some signallers have been away from home for three Christmases in a row. That emphasises the degree of personal sacrifice that is necessarily involved in being in operations of that sort.

On manpower shortages, in 1999 Royal Navy manpower was 4.6 per cent. down on what it should be, but that was worse than the previous year. Army manpower was 5.3 per cent. down, which again was worse. Only the Royal Air Force, with manpower 2.3 per cent. down on what it should be, was doing rather better than it had in the previous 12 months.

Undermanning has been well documented. The trained requirement of the Army is 105,300, but we are at least 5,000 short. The Secretary of State has said—I think that the Minister repeated this in his opening speech—that the requirement will be achieved by 2005. When the adjutant-general gave evidence to the Select Committee on Defence, he said of 1999–2000:

> this year I expect to meet virtually 100 per cent. of my recruiting targets for both officers and men and between 95 and 100 per cent. of my output training targets.

If he achieves those targets, it will be a considerable sea change from previous performance. The Army Training and Recruiting Agency missed five out of six key targets in 1998–99. It had an achievement rate—now that targeting is included—of about 17 per cent. against the six targets that had been set.

The deputy chief executive of the agency told me in a letter that part of the difficulty was

> the effects of the increased level of operational commitment by the Field Army

which were continuing to carry through into recruitment. He also said that insufficient recruitment in previous years had resulted in shortfalls for officers qualified for field service.

Many of the present difficulties had their origins in decisions taken some time ago. The Government have been entitled to enjoy some sort of honeymoon—I shall return to that—and turning this ship round, like turning an oil tanker round, is sometimes rather difficult. I do not wish to be over-harsh on the Government, but they may reach a point at which they will run out of excuses if they try to say that everything is the fault of those who went before.

Some of what I have said brings into sharp relief the way in which overstretch filters down to affect all levels of armed services operations. In June 1999, nearly half of Army personnel and 72 per cent. of Land Command personnel were on operations. At the same time, 476 RAF pilots were serving outside the mainland. In 1998–99, in a number of RAF squadrons the 140 nights away from home threshold was reached by more than 30 per cent. of personnel. On a more immediate and personal note from the point of view of those who were subjected to it, over the 1999–2000 Christmas and new year period—a traditional time for families to spend together, and the armed services are no different—35 per cent. of the Army's trained strength was serving abroad. That was 3,500 more than in 1998–99. The average soldier is "out of bed" 20 per cent. of the time, with some divisions suffering significantly higher percentages, as has been acknowledged.

I understand that the Government have commissioned an Army retention study, which has been mentioned today I think, and a number of other reports. I hope that those will be put into the Library and the public domain, not kept secret. They may not fall within the provisions of the freedom of information legislation, which is rather less vigorous than I should have liked, but I hope that—to enlist the support of those who have an interest in the matter—the Government will be willing to make the information that the reports contain available on a wider basis.

The hon. Member for Salisbury rightly mentioned divorce. He was also right to rely on those figures, as they were elicited by my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) and myself in a series of questions to the Government. They are yet another index of the problems caused for those who serve in the armed services.

It is not just the Army that has had difficulties. Between August 1999 and January 2000, the Navy, the Air Force, the Royal Marines, the Territorial Army, the Naval Reserves and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force all saw a net outflow of trained personnel. In some respects, that was due to demographic and economic trends, which have worked against the training and manning agencies. Yet overstretch, inadequate or unavailable equipment or late delivery of large procurement projects have also had a significant effect.

The chief executive of the RAF Training Group Defence Agency wrote to me explaining why it did not achieve the target that it was obliged to achieve. Fast-jet pilot training had suffered because operational commitments took qualified flying instructors away from training. There were problems with aircraft serviceability, not enough trainers because of operations and not enough serviceable planes to train on. On the multi-engine programme, student numbers had to be reduced because of the delayed delivery of the C130J, and the front line could not absorb such pilots as there were. Instructor shortages resulted in the cancellation of navigator training courses, and some navigator recruits were switched to pilot training to make up for shortfalls elsewhere.

That, and much that has been said this afternoon—about which there is strong common ground throughout the House—illustrates the nature of the difficulty. It illustrates how, year on year, financial reductions and sometimes—to be blunt—poor management and decision making in the past have cumulatively contributed to our present difficulties.

The Government rightly began with the strategic defence review. They could reasonably argue, during that process and for some little time afterwards, that their concentration on that was paramount and justified. However, we have now passed from the period of conception to the period of delivery. The responsibility is now the Government's, and we will all be looking at whether the Government's aspirations are matched by their achievements.

3.32 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). I respected his contribution to the

Select Committee on Defence and miss him now that he is no longer on it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Aah!"] It was extremely helpful to the new members on the Committee to have anchors—members who knew the subject inside out—to help us understand the issues.

This is an interesting area, particularly when one comes new to it. I have found some defence terminology extremely difficult to get to grips with. We often talk in the Select Committee, and wherever the Select Committee goes to visit the armed forces, about UAVs, Paveways, DSO and bars. I find the subject of today's debate much easier to get to grips with, as it is about what those who serve in our armed forces mean to us and how much they are a force for good in our nation.

Some right hon. and hon. Members say that our armed forces must be held in special regard, and I believe that to be true. But it troubles me, particularly having been a nurse, when people say to me as a Member of Parliament, "Of course, you don't quite understand how things work in the armed forces." They talk in a very patronising way, as if not having served in the armed forces means that one cannot understand how they work. People have done that to nurses for many years. They call them wonderful angels, but the reality is that nurses, just like those in the armed forces—although we respect and understand that extra mile that we want our armed forces to go for us—want to be treated decently. We all want to be offered the advantages that other people have. Why should we not?

People sometimes argue that the armed forces should have a different system of discipline from that available to other members of our community. That argument cannot be supported. Why should they not be treated decently, with proper remuneration? Their contribution should be reflected in the remuneration they receive and in the way in which we view them. Their backgrounds should be respected and their rights protected. Their families should be decently housed, their children should receive a good education and there should be first-class health care for all. Their equipment must not let them down, and they should have time to recuperate between tours of duty. My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith), who is no longer in the Chamber, referred to that. However, having visited many of our armed forces in the United Kingdom and abroad, I understand that part of the reason why personnel want to be there is that they like being kept busy and active. Striking the right balance is important. That is why getting things right for our service people's families back home is so important. The Select Committee has considered many of those matters. Those are the issues that I particularly enjoy, and we have tackled them in depth.

The Government are making enormous progress. We are tackling the things that most trouble our armed forces abroad. Why should a serving soldier be worried because his wife or partner is concerned that their daughter is moving school for the fourth time? That means that he cannot concentrate on his job. Why should we allow that to happen? The Government are actively tackling that issue to ensure that we offer decent education and change the way in which we allow accommodation to be kept for service families even though there may be changes for the person serving.

No matter where we went—and particularly in the Falkland Islands—the question of access to telephones drove people crazy, I was in the Falklands for just a week, and I felt completely isolated from my family. I had to buy a £10 phone card, which was chewed up instantly. As soon as we got home, however, Ministers responded and enormous changes were made to the amount of time that people were allowed to telephone home and use computers to send e-mail. Those are the things that make a difference for our armed forces.

I have already mentioned discipline. Some people argue that the Armed Forces Discipline Bill will change the way in which we do business and destroy discipline within the armed forces. I cannot think of anything more untrue. We should all be subject to the same rules and regulations. If I were at home and my husband was in trouble for some reason, I would want to be sure that proper procedures were being adhered to, rather than his being taken behind the latrines and told off. We must ensure that those in the armed forces are subject to the same rules as the rest of us.

The armed forces are special—we cannot get away from that. Respecting every member of the armed forces is crucial, irrespective of where and who they are, whatever their gender, sexual orientation or ethnic origin. If there is anything in our society that should be a meritocracy, it must be our armed forces.

We must ensure that everyone has a career path through the services. I am heartened by the way in which the national vocational qualification system has been embraced by the armed forces, and the learning credits and extended learning credits have been taken up so successfully. I believe that if people are fit for the armed forces and get a good education, they are fit for life itself.

We must be careful not to forget about people once they are in the armed forces. We must set targets to improve their work, and the Government have been brave about that: for example, they have set targets for the number of people from different backgrounds in the forces. There is no better way to be judged, because these are not just weasel words—the Government are striving to achieve the targets that they set, and I am very pleased to hear that, in many ways, they are doing just that.

I return to the important question of service families. We must ensure that our service men and women are able to settle down and do the jobs demanded of them. We are struggling to recover from the appalling mess that resulted from the previous Government's housing sell-off. Few members of the Select Committee disagree about that. I too pay tribute to the Army Families Federation, whose excellent reports are a superb source of information, for the Select Committee and all hon. Members, about the problems faced by army families.

The federation has recommended that the relatives of serving men and women abroad should be able to make decisions about what happens to their homes. Why should people serving in Kosovo, for instance, have to worry about things back home, such as moving house? Why should not their spouses or partners be able to deal with that? I support the recommendation wholeheartedly.

Unlike the previous Government, this Government are able to look holistically at the problems faced by all our communities, including the armed forces. Housing and forward planning for our service personnel is crucial. I was heartened that the housing Green Paper recognised for the first time that some service personnel should be considered homeless. The way forward must be to talk to local authorities and housing associations. I am not keen on the phrase "joined-up government", but it must be right to involve other Departments in resolving those people's difficulties.

[Laura Moffatt]

The Select Committee deals with many matters, but I am especially interested in the defence medical services. I was recently lobbied by people campaigning for Crawley hospital, who told me about their experiences talking to Ministers, so I—and other Select Committee colleagues—understand the strength of feeling involved.

The Select Committee often revisits the question whether the defence medical services will recover from their almost impossible position. However, I believe that that recovery is beginning. There is now proper co-operation between those services and the national health service to resolve their joint problems. The House cannot pretend that the two services can be separated and that they have nothing to do with each other. I think that that has sometimes been the temptation, but we must consider the two services together.

The Select Committee report was a little firm on the question of the Territorial Army, about which the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) has been most exercised. Many members of the Committee supported the hon. Gentleman in his work to ensure that the Government understood the worth of the Territorial Army. In my own town, the 103 Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers regiment has undergone painful and enormous change, but it has said that that has been to its advantage, as its TA personnel are used more effectively and are more involved in regimental activities.

However, we must ensure that the Territorial Army gets the training days that it needs. They are crucial if the TA is to play its part. Its members are keen to work alongside their full-time counterparts, so it is vital that they get the necessary training.

There has been an enormous upturn in recruitment to the armed forces. The success of the recently introduced taster days prompts me to suggest that all three services should offer work experience. I do not know whether other hon. Members are like me in allowing young people into their offices for two weeks so that they can see how the House works. I cannot take them everywhere, but I can give them a good idea of what it is to be a Member of Parliament. I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will listen to the suggestion that work experience might give young people a better idea of service life.

The people in our armed forces enthuse me and make me willing to sit for hours in the Select Committee meetings to make sure that we get right the way that they do their business, as we are in business on their behalf. We must also remember those who have served before, and I am keen to recognise the contribution of women, especially in the second world war. Important fundraising efforts are in hand for a memorial to those women who served in the forces and to those who contributed in other ways to the war effort. I have done some fundraising with the women's section of the British Legion at Lowfield Heath. They are wonderful women and keen to raise some cash for the memorial.

Mr. Cohen: I strongly support the campaign for a memorial to the women involved, in all sorts of ways, in the second world war. Is not there a case for putting that memorial on the empty plinth in Trafalgar square?

Laura Moffatt: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion, which I was too bashful to make myself. That is exactly where the memorial should go, and I know that Madam Speaker supports the campaign. I hope that our wishes come true.

In conclusion, two and half years is not a long time for the Government to examine the armed forces. I have been bowled over by the efficiency and pleasantness of our service personnel—and by how tough they can be when the chips are down. It is a lesson for us all. Having learned what went on in the 18 years before this Government came to power, I know that, if I were a serving member of the armed forces, I would prefer to serve under a Labour Government.

3.50 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) was frank enough to say, "I come new to it." I think the House will agree that she presented her case in an attractive and enthusiastic way. She said—the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has recently left the Chamber—that she was speaking for those on the Labour Benches. Sadly, those Benches were almost deserted. I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton), "It's a pretty depressing debate, isn't it?"

The hon. Lady has paid tribute to our armed forces, including all those personnel whom she has met during her work on the Select Committee on Defence. I am delighted that she is finding that work enjoyable and interesting, even without the presence of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). As a good and loyal member of the Labour party—no doubt she was provided with a party brief—she had to do her duty and attack the Opposition and then say how wonderful everything is going now. All the armed forces personnel whom she has met, and whom she admires for their training, professionalism and skills, were trained when the Conservative party was in power. Her time, and the assessment of her legacy and her party's and Government's legacy, are yet to come.

It is easy to make political jibes across the Chamber. I have a slight personal interest in the matter because people have been kind enough to pay some tribute to what we Conservatives tried to do during our time in office. When I was Secretary of State for Defence, I was never in any doubt that all those sitting on the Benches behind me gave a high priority to the cause of defence. I knew that they would be anxious to ensure that defence was properly supported. I made sure that it was, in the face of quite sustained criticism from Labour Members.

The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) got himself in quite a muddle. I could not work out whether he was in favour of more or fewer cuts. He referred to the overall reductions that had been made by the Conservative Government. In his rather tortuous arguments, he eventually remembered that we saw the end of the cold war, that Germany had been unified, that the Warsaw pact had collapsed, and that as a result there were certain differences in strategic defence then from when we came into power. I remember the changes that we made. I remember also that I was attacked strongly by Labour Members for not going a lot further.

The enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Crawley is infectious, and she tried to encourage the House to believe that things are going rather well. I sat in my place for a couple of hours waiting to contribute to the debate

because I fear that the hon. Lady's view is incorrect. I am seriously worried about the state of our armed forces. She chided me implicitly. She said that she had come completely new to these matters and perhaps suggested that it would be condescending if anybody said, "I served in the armed forces and somehow that gives me superiority in the debate." I accept that that would be wrong. Everybody has his or her contribution to make.

As a nurse, the hon. Lady brings relevant experience to the debate in terms of the defence medical services, but it is not a bad thing if one or two Members have some experience of the services. I know the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, and we have taken part in certain recreational activities together. I have affection for him. However, on reading "Dod", it is clear to me that no Defence Minister has served in the armed forces. Nor can I find in "Dod" any one of them who took any interest in defence after entering the House. Their interests are listed and they are perfectly respectable, but not one of them has previously been involved in defence. It is interesting also to see the pecking order in the Cabinet and the position of the Secretary of State for Defence. Does not the message go out to our armed forces that the Government do not approach defence with the priority and importance that were previously attached to it?

None of these things is an overriding argument. However, every Minister, as did the hon. Member for Crawley, pays a warm tribute to our armed forces. They say that they are wonderful and refer to their professionalism. They add that they are admired throughout the world. The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan told us of the countries and places he has visited. He told a story about the Black Watch in Red square. The excellence of our armed forces does not come about by accident. It is the result of an effective recruitment policy, an effective training policy and the tradition of military conduct and training that has been handed down over generations, on which our armed forces are built. These elements account for their standing, and without a doubt they are a critically important and precious national asset.

However, I believe that that asset is at risk. It is bound to be at risk. If we have forces that do not have adequate time for training, being put in situations where their families will rebel, causing them to choose between their service or their families, and if they are not being given adequate time for recreation, it is not necessary to be a long-serving member of the armed forces to recognise that the pressures will lead to personnel leaving the services. So often, we lose the best and the most skilled.

The Army marches, but not necessarily on generals or privates. The key to the Army is the core of trained lieutenants, captains, young majors, sergeant majors, sergeants and corporals. They are the people with the long service. The average service in the Army is about five or six years. Of course, not everyone serves for that time. Many squaddies or privates serve a three-year tour, while others will serve for 15 or 20 years, or more. They are the key to the Army, and they must be retained.

It is often asked, "How are we doing on retention and wastage?" The question is asked on the basis of those who are leaving and those who are joining. Unless we have regard to the quality of those who have left, the answer does not mean a thing.

There is a turnover of squaddies or private soldiers. They are young men who join, get some experience and move on to another career or activity. Over the years they have always made a huge contribution to our armed services. That is fine. However, if at one end we are taking in entirely untrained and inexperienced people while at the other we are losing all those with experience and skills, we are heading only one way.

I can reassure the Minister that he will not find that happening today or next week. The process will continue for a while but eventually we shall find the edifice beginning to crumble. In three or four years' time, right hon. and hon. Members will ask—I shall not, because I shall not be here—"How did we get into this mess?" It is not enough to make enthusiastic noises. In addition, the Minister will have to make some tough decisions. I agree very much with what the right hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife said about resources.

In his enthusiastically vague contribution, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan said that he was not in favour of any more cuts. But the Government whom he thought he was supporting by making that remark are imposing cuts at present. The 3 per cent. year-on-year efficiency saving has been imposed by the Treasury, and I was one of the first to suffer from its use of that blunt instrument. When the Government have considered every saving that the Treasury can identify and all its arguments on where savings can be made, they come to the end of the line. When they and no one else can think of any other savings to make, they say that there will be a 3 per cent. efficiency saving. Nobody knows where it will come from. Much of it is made by pretty creative accounting of so-called gains and savings and one has to be quite a psephologist to understand how such calculations are made.

If the savings are not genuine or if they cannot be found, they represent cuts. If they are made when increasing commitments are taken on, we will head in a very dangerous direction. The Minister and his colleagues are all new to this subject and they are having to face these problems for the first time. However, the sad experience of defence is that it is incredibly difficult to drop a commitment and quite easy to take on new ones.

One only has to consider how long we have been in Cyprus. Whenever our forces are sent anywhere, we think that it will be just for a short time. When troops were dispatched to Northern Ireland, Lord Callaghan did not think that he was making a 30-year arrangement. However, such arrangements have a habit of enduring and new problems arise.

People sometimes say that we need not worry because the world is stable and new problems will not arise, When I introduced the measures in "Options for Change"—a bad title, but a well-organised plan—I was interviewed by a BBC reporter. At that time the Berlin wall was coming down, the Warsaw pact was collapsing and peace reigned in the world. We made the changes that we did, but I was challenged for not going further. The BBC reporter asked me why we were keeping such a substantial number of armed forces and why we were spending more than £20 billion. He said, "What is the threat that you think we are now supposed to be guarding against, when all the threats that used to exist now seem to have been resolved?" I replied that the threat was the unexpected, and a week later Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait—the unexpected had happened.

[Mr. Tom King]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) pointed out, no intelligence prepared us for the invasion. We had no more warning of it than we did over the Falklands. When the unexpected happens, the Ministry of Defence has to perform and our forces have to be ready, trained and available to meet whatever challenge we decide it necessary in the national interest to confront.

I have described the background and my experience. They explain why I am acutely worried about the current position. I intervened when the Minister for the Armed Forces spoke to ask him when we would reach full manning levels for the Army. It is now 2000, and the plan for manning has already slipped, but I was told that we shall reach full manning levels in 2005.

I served under Baroness Thatcher. She had a very good reply when ideas were put to her. Someone would argue that years one and two of a project would be pretty difficult, that year three might also be a charge on the Exchequer, but that matters would be highly satisfactory in years four and five and the Exchequer would then be rewarded for its investment. She used to say that years four and five never come. When I heard that we should be all right in five years, I knew for certain that the Army will not have full manning levels next year, the year after, the year after or—God help us—the year after that. If the Government think that there will be no trouble and that perfect peace will rule in the world for the next five years, that shows just how serious the position is.

Things are even worse than that, however. The Government have reduced commitments a bit and things are muddling along even though I have the acute fear that we are losing trained and skilled people. The trouble is that, in three or four years, the position will be different; it is not static. Our armed forces will be less capable and stuck in a vicious circle. If the Government cannot take the necessary steps so that the armed forces can resolve the manning issue quickly, the problem could deteriorate seriously. As my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury pointed out, the Select Committee warned us about that:

> The problems of undermanning and overstretch have not been solved and the position in the past year has almost certainly deteriorated.

That means that in the Balkans, the Falklands, Cyprus, Germany, Northern Ireland or wherever it may be, sergeants, captains, flight lieutenants and other officers will begin to wonder whether they will have to spend their fourth Christmas away from their families or whether they will have to spend more time away from a new-born child. They will be forced to take decisions, and they will leave the services. The commanding officer then has to go down the line to ask someone else to take on extra duties. That person may have been thinking of staying, but may suddenly decide that he cannot take on extra responsibilities. Gradually and steadily, the problem escalates.

The hon. Member for Crawley said that she thought things were going quite well. When I was a Minister, I tried to establish tour intervals of 24 months. When they reached intervals of 17 and 18 months, I became worried. I checked with the Library on the current figures for tour intervals and I could not believe them: they are unsustainable. If people have to go on unaccompanied tours at such short intervals, only one thing can result—a serious deterioration in the capability of the armed forces.

As I have some experience of these matters, I hope that the Minister will convey the tenor of my remarks to his colleagues. The Government face more of a problem than the Minister for the Armed Forces seemed to appreciate in his speech. The tradition of loyalty and service of the armed forces acts, in certain circumstances, to their own disadvantage. If one asks them to undertake a new responsibility, their training means that they stand to attention, salute and say, "If you tell me to do it, sir, that is what will be done." They do not stand up, have a really good argument and then say, "For once, we shall say no." That is a problem. They will always undertake new responsibilities and the price that they pay to carry them out may not always be apparent to Ministers and may not always be set out as clearly as it should be. The Ministry of Defence and the armed services do not want to appear unwilling to undertake their responsibilities, but that can sometimes lead a serious deterioration in their capabilities.

Furthermore, I could not believe the number of reservists—Territorial Army—currently on active service in Bosnia or the Balkans. Of course, reservists are useful—occasionally, in an emergency. However, they are reserves and the fact that we are employing them permanently offers the clearest illustration of how serious the shortfall is.

I realise that it is easy enough to set out the problems, but much harder to resolve them. However, Ministers will get the blame, if my fears come to pass; the Treasury will not say, "It was really all our fault." Ministers will be blamed and that precious national asset of which they are currently the trustees will have been destroyed, thus endangering the security of our country.

We were challenged when we disputed the idea that, with 3 per cent. expenditure savings, we can continue to reduce the defence budget, while maintaining our commitments without enough trained and properly equipped forces. The loss of trained and skilled personnel poses a serious threat, especially so soon after the review, which itself was not the great achievement claimed by the Government.

The Ministry of Defence, the Treasury and the Prime Minister should hold fundamental and urgent discussions. If other contributions are wanted, I should be willing to play my part. This should not be a party political battle. We are talking about our armed forces, who have served our country over the years, whichever party was in government. They need to be properly protected and to have their future capacity assured.

4.12 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): In his significant and serious speech, the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) recalled Lord Callaghan sending troops to Northern Ireland. At the end of the 1969 Session, I went to Lord Callaghan to argue that the Scottish regiments should not be sent to Northern Ireland. At his most formidable and avuncular, Jim said, "Don't worry—only 16 weeks and we will sort it out." Well, 16 weeks have become 30 years and will possibly be much longer. That confirms the point made by the right hon. Gentleman that we can never know what is around the corner.

In view of the right hon. Gentleman's opening remarks, I should point out that I am an honorary member of the mess of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards—my former

national service regiment, the Royal Scots Greys, in which I served as a gunner. That relates to the point I want to make. During my visit to Bosnia two years ago, I had a long session with the sergeants' mess at the suggestion of a colonel. They told me that it was a bit much—their language was stronger—that, during their home leave in Fallingbostel, Luneburg or elsewhere in Germany, they were paid less, because of overseas allowances, for the time that they served through all the difficulties in Bosnia than if they had been in Germany.

I realise that overseas allowances are a complex problem. However, although I argued that we should never have gone to Bosnia in the first place, I think that we shall stay there for my lifetime. The same may be true of Kosovo—those are continuing commitments.

Mr. Tom King *indicated assent.*

Mr. Dalyell: Those areas have become de facto United Nations protectorates, so we need long-term arrangements. Can the MOD institute a scheme whereby the payments made to those personnel whose families are with the Rhine Army can at least be equal to those they receive when they are in a difficult and challenging theatre of operations?

I must apologise to the House because I shall not be able to remain in the Chamber. As I am chairman of the all-party Latin America group, I want to attend a meeting at Lancaster house at which the President of Colombia will make an important statement.

I have one further reflection. My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) mentioned a monument to the nurses. The Ministry of Defence has been most helpful in relation to the Scottish nurses who served during the first world war. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence has great medical knowledge, so he will be aware that they performed heroics at Royaumont in 1917–18 and had previously done so in Serbia. Their work was brilliantly written up by Dr. Eileen Crofton. I hope that the MOD will consider what can be done to commemorate them.

4.17 pm

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): It is always a privilege to speak in debates on our armed forces, especially after hon. Members such as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). The right hon. Gentleman has a wealth of experience—in uniform and as a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and for Defence. He speaks wise words, and has a breadth and depth of understanding that we should acknowledge.

During 17 years as a Member of Parliament, I have frequently paid tribute to the courage and dedication of members of our armed forces—so much so that it almost becomes hackneyed. However, my tribute is not intended to be hackneyed. For almost 12 years, I had the privilege of serving alongside regular troops from Great Britain and full and part-time soldiers from Northern Ireland. I am aware of the tremendous sacrifice that has been made over 30 years.

Yesterday, the Royal Ulster Constabulary was presented with the George Cross—and rightly so. However, it is also appropriate to acknowledge the support given by our armed forces during the 30 years of violence in Northern Ireland. As a member of a small minority party, I regret that I do not have the same opportunity as members of larger parties to go abroad and visit places where our forces are serving, such as Kosovo, Bosnia or the Falklands. However, perhaps I make up for that through living cheek by jowl with our serving soldiers for the past 30 years.

I do not want to dwell exclusively on Northern Ireland issues, but want to suggest that the House has three responsibilities to our armed forces: on resources, on conditions and on equipment. Whatever the party of government, resources are always a huge problem. It is therefore incumbent on the Government and the House to ensure that the best possible use is made of resources. One can never dictate conditions, but by giving consideration to equipment we can serve our soldiers well.

In Kosovo, the Serbian troops were dug in. Precision bombing was therefore a key element of our campaign, to the extent that some of us became concerned that it was counterproductive. None the less, the supply and reinforcement routes to the Serbian army had to be cut, and initially we relied almost exclusively on our Air Force. One can imagine how concerned we were to hear that, whereas the GR1 had always been successful in its laser designations bombing system, the GR4 had run into such difficulties that it was unable to operate. That problem had been known about since 1998, and it has taken at least two and a half years to put it right.

There are always difficulties with new technology, and especially with high technology. Over the years, whatever party has been in government, there have been times when overspend has been necessary. On occasion, vast resources have been expended and nothing has been produced. I remember the debacle of the airborne warning and control system—AWACS—several years ago. We must ensure that we take every opportunity to use resources wisely by buying proven equipment.

A huge tribute must be paid to our pilots in that the vast majority of errors made during the Kosovo campaign were not made by United Kingdom pilots, but errors are not always made by pilots; there can be errors in information and intelligence. We must congratulate our forces on their success in Kosovo and consider the problems that they had to face. Those problems were not always connected with aircraft, and we are told that aircraft problems did not impact greatly on that campaign, although they could have done.

The campaign was certainly affected by the problem that our Army probably has the worst rifle of any modern army in western Europe. I know why the SA80 was chosen and how important it was to Royal Ordnance, but it has not been a success, and neither has the SA80 light machine gun. It is an accurate weapon, and it is probably more accurate than the SLR, which preceded it, but it is not as reliable. I am old enough to remember the mark 4 Lee Enfield.

Mr. Tom King *indicated assent.*

Mr. Maginnis: The right hon. Gentleman also remembers it. That was a wonderfully accurate and reliable weapon. Times move on and technology improves, but I was astonished to read that the SA80 is dangerous to a left-handed soldier because of how it discharges its rounds. Our soldiers, whether left or right-handed, have had to learn to fire off the right shoulder.

[Mr. Maginnis]

I know of the right hon. Gentleman's interest in cricket. Can he imagine what success the English cricket team would have if we made our right-handed batsmen play left-handed, or vice versa? On second thoughts, that might be a good idea. As a village schoolmaster, I would never have forced a left-handed child to use his or her right hand. Psychological damage may result from facing the challenge of working unnaturally along with the challenge of learning or, in the case of our soldiers, of trying to survive in a fire fight. That should have been thought about before the SA80 was issued.

Mr. Brazier: I support every word that the hon. Gentleman has said. The SA80 also presents the problem that, whether one is right or left-handed, effectively one cannot fire around the left-hand corner of a building without exposing one's entire body, which is ridiculous. It is manifestly an unsoldierly weapon.

Mr. Maginnis: Indeed, the hon. Gentleman reinforces my point. I do not want to go on ad infinitum about our soldiers' faulty equipment, but it is important that someone points out the problems. Our radios have been a problem since I first put on a uniform, 30 years ago. It seems that our radios have never worked, and I believe that the problem is getting worse. What are we going to do to provide our soldiers with equipment that works and gives them confidence?

I referred to bomb-aiming equipment, and I turn now to another weapon that will be essential during the next decade. I refer to the need to bring into operation the beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile—BVRAAM—programme for the Eurofighter. Shorts Thompson, in my part of the world, has proposed to provide an extended-range air-to-air missile that has been tested, whereas no other weapon being tendered at this stage has been proven. Shorts Thompson is offering a proven weapon at half the price. It will represent value for money because it is faster, better and cheaper.

I shall say more about the needs of our soldiers in a moment. If the MOD is concerned about stretching resources, it should consider tested and proven equipment that builds on the advanced medium-range air-to-air missile that has been in service for some time, and offers the opportunity to extend the technology at comparatively—everything is costly in absolute terms—little cost. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) expressed his frustration that the debate is not specifically about procurement. However, we cannot consider the interests of our personnel without touching on that issue. Therefore, I hope that the Government will take best advantage of the resources available to them.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman also mentioned the consequences of underestablishment in our security forces, including overstretch and pressure on families, and he quoted figures that I have with me. I shall not reiterate his remarks, but should like to present the figures in a slightly different fashion. We currently expect our soldiers to undertake operational tours at an unsustainable rate. Over the past four years, the Royal Armoured Corps has suffered a 60 per cent. reduction in the intervals between operational tours; the Royal Artillery a 50 per cent. reduction; the Royal Engineers and Royal Signals a 70 per cent. reduction; and the infantry a reduction of almost 50 per cent. That cannot be sustained. I can offer the Government no solution, but it is a problem that they must address as a matter of urgency. At a time when there is adequate employment in the civilian world for our young men and women, what will be the attraction of Army life if such demands continue to be made? I should say that I recognise that the Government are aware of the problem and I welcome the increase in separation allowances.

Let me return to events in Northern Ireland. There is now huge pressure—political pressure, although that is not always admitted—on our Army and police, such that its being carried through to its logical conclusion will not only endanger society in Northern Ireland, but place our operational troops in danger. There has been a reduction—I hope that it is justified—in the number of soldiers posted to duty in Northern Ireland: the number of roulement battalions has been reduced to only two. If those troops are not required on the ground, the reduction in their number is welcome, as none of us wants to see our soldiers while away idle hours behind barracks walls. However, I hope that the reduction is not making it necessary for members of the Royal Irish Regiment, who live in Northern Ireland and serve, not in six-month tours, but continuously, to work the long hours—80 or 90 hours a week—that they have had to work on previous occasions.

Mr. Key: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Royal Navy bears its share of that pressure? Was he as disturbed as I was to hear talk of the withdrawal, in response to budgetary pressures, of the three guardships from Northern Ireland? My understanding is that those vessels are crucial to the security of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Maginnis: There is no doubt that the Royal Navy presence is absolutely crucial. That detachment currently works under extreme pressure in Northern Ireland. It is a matter of huge regret to us that two soldiers on attachment to the Royal Navy were killed in a recent accident. The leader of my party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), has previously paid tribute to members of the armed forces in Northern Ireland who have made such sacrifices.

I listened with interest to the remarks about people with criminal records being recruited into the armed services. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will be careful about that. It has ever been so—there is nothing particularly new in the proposal—but that does not mean that the Army, the Navy or the Air Force provide accommodation for criminals. Service in the armed forces provides opportunities to those who are prepared to turn over a new leaf and submit themselves to the authority and discipline of the armed services. It is probably too long since I first put on a uniform for me to avoid wondering about the issue of discipline within our armed services. I hope that the Government will do nothing to undermine the authority of our experienced and extremely good senior officers in disciplinary matters. If we are to provide people who have criminal records with new opportunities in the armed services, they must fully understand their commitment to their regiment. The last thing we want is to find that the Army is considered to be some sort of sin bin—that must not happen.

Discipline in the Army will come under increasing pressure from external sources. We have seen that happen to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The RUC is under pressure from those who claim to represent human rights interests, despite the fact that, in the face of the most serious provocation, the RUC has maintained discipline for more than 30 years, during which time tens of thousands of people have served in it. Despite that, in a few days' time, the Government are to introduce a 50-page Bill that, as I read it, deals exclusively with how we can put constraints on our police. Will the same thing happen to our Army as it fulfils a policing role throughout the world?

The Saville commission has been meeting in Northern Ireland, 28 years after what all of us agree was an unfortunate and tragic Sunday in 1972. Nobody doubts that mistakes were made. Equally, nobody doubts that in 1972 our troops were not trained to the level to which they are now trained to deal with civil disturbance. I cannot remember clearly what happened 28 years ago. Sometimes I cannot remember what happened yesterday, and I certainly have some difficulty with 1972.

The Army is being examined in a way that will be unfair to it. It was interesting to learn that Martin McGuinness, who is qualified to be a Member of this place, was possibly the person who fired the first shot in 1972. Those of us who have known his activities in the intervening years will not be surprised by that. The sad thing is that the Army will not have dedicated propagandists to deal with Mr. McGuinness's misdemeanours at that time, whereas there are those who have a vested interest in denigrating our Army, and not just in Northern Ireland. It will happen wherever our Army serves for an extended period.

It is important that morale, resources and equipment are sustained at a level that gives the Army the confidence to operate in the most difficult and dreadful circumstances, as we have seen it operate over the years.

I close as I began, by paying tribute to the men and women who, as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater properly pointed out, no matter what we throw at them from this place, maintain their discipline and are unquestioning in the service that they give. Hence, it is up to us to reciprocate.

4.43 pm

Sir Archie Hamilton (Epsom and Ewell): I follow the Minister for the Armed Forces in the tributes that he paid to our armed forces and the enthusiasm, pride and professionalism that they demonstrate.

We are fortunate in our armed forces, who have a unique capability. As one of the great institutions of this country, they seem to hold their place in the esteem of the people of Britain, at a time when, regrettably, our judiciary has declined in public esteem and, even more regrettably, our police are not viewed with the same respect as they used to be, but that certainly does not apply to the armed forces.

Of course, Parliament and Members of Parliament have probably sunk in public esteem more rapidly than any other part of our national institutions. One wonders about the esteem in which the Labour party holds our armed forces, when there is not a single Labour Back Bencher in the Chamber to take part in the debate. That indicates the attitude of the Labour party towards the armed forces. It will be recognised by members of the armed forces that Labour Members, other than the Minister and the Whip sitting on the Front Bench, cannot be bothered to be present.

The Minister referred to the long periods of separation that our armed forces have to undergo. He recognised that that was extremely bad for family life in the forces, and consequently for retention. The divorce rates, which have become worse since 1990, are a signal that something is badly wrong and must be addressed.

It is not good enough for the Government to say that because the people involved are, on the whole, young married couples, it is unfair to compare the divorce rates in the armed forces with those for the nation as a whole. The fact that the divorce rate has been increasing over recent years is a matter of enormous concern and must be tackled.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): The rate did get worse in one year, but it has been fluctuating for many years.

Sir Archie Hamilton: That is reflected in retention. I am sure the Minister recognises that the retention problems are great. Often, the cause of service men leaving is the fact that their wives complain bitterly. Young couples do not expect to get married and not to see each other for a prolonged period because the husband is away on service. They complain bitterly about that, and it is one of the reasons why retention is running as badly as it is at present.

The Minister said that the commitments to operations, running at 27 per cent., were the same as they were in 1997. I do not find that a source of great reassurance. We know that the situation in Northern Ireland is extremely difficult. As the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) mentioned, things could well get even more difficult there over the next few months, and we would then have to increase force levels in Northern Ireland.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said, other commitments might arise. It is extremely difficult to drop existing commitments, but very easy to take up new ones, as the history of our commitments around the world shows. It is difficult to see any major difference between Bosnia and Kosovo, and Cyprus, where we have been for 30 years. As the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) observed, we will no doubt have United Nations commitments in Bosnia and Kosovo for the rest of our lives, and probably for the lifetime of any other hon. Member as well, because such situations seem to go on for ever.

The Minister correctly identified successful training as essential to our forces. The fact that they are, on the whole, better trained than any other army makes them so exceptional. I am sure that the Government therefore recognise the considerable concern that is caused when exercises are cancelled, as has been happening; when flying hours are reduced from 203,000 hours in 1996 to 184,000 in 1999; when we have to economise on ships on patrol; and when cuts are made constantly, reducing the training opportunities for our armed forces. That is a matter of great concern.

When we consider training, we have to ask what our armed forces are for. As my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) said, that great and brilliant general,

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Mike Jackson, tried to complete the circle, saying that they had to be prepared to do almost anything. There has always been the serious question whether our armed forces exist to defend these shores and to be prepared to be involved in high-intensity warfare, or whether they are to be peacekeepers, deployed all round the world, doing an entirely different job.

General Mike Rose always took the view that soldiers could not be asked to do both. Either they were in the business of helping old ladies across the road, escorting food convoys, and generally being rather gentle policemen to people whom they were trying to keep apart, or they were in the business of killing people. Both roles cannot be combined, and it is unfair to ask the armed forces to do that.

We must always bear in mind the bottom line: the job of our armed forces is high intensity warfare and to defend our shores and our interests in wars. We must be careful that we do not degrade their capacity to do that when we send them on peacekeeping missions.

Mr. Key: Was my hon. Friend as surprised as me that the strategic defence review almost ignored home defence? My hon. Friend referred twice to defending these shores, but the strategic defence review assumed that there was no longer any need to do that or for the military to have such a role.

Sir Archie Hamilton: Indeed. We were told that the strategic defence review was foreign policy led. I am still waiting to hear the Foreign Office advice. The Government claim to be committed to openness and making advice available to everybody, yet we are not allowed to know the contents of an essential document, which was the basis of the strategic defence review. What does that mean in the context of freedom of information? The document is not especially sensitive, and it is extraordinary that we cannot be given the Foreign Office advice on which the review was based.

I presume that the Foreign Office was not especially interested in home defence and that it suggested that defence policy could be skewed in favour of overseas commitments. It overlooked the fact that the purpose of our armed forces is to ensure that this country is properly defended.

The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) was a bit cheeky when he suggested that the strategic defence review was good for morale. I do not know to whom he spoke, but clearly he and I talked to different people. The review was supposed to take place over six months. It took much longer because the usual turf war broke out. Morale did not go up; it went down as a consequence of the strategic defence review. Its findings, especially the 3 per cent. in so-called savings, did even more to break morale.

Mr. Brazier: My right hon. Friend mentioned home defence. Asymmetric warfare and the threat it poses to this country received one short mention in the strategic defence review. In contrast, of the 23 conclusions reached in the recent American review, which was published last September, the first was that asymmetric warfare posed a serious threat to mainland America in the next few years.

Sir Archie Hamilton: I referred to that in an earlier debate on the Defence White Paper. Serious worries derive from my hon. Friend's point. If a massive superpower—arguably the only remaining superpower—takes on some small country, which is rendered incapable of reacting militarily, there are serious questions about that small country's future reaction. It is enormously worrying for the security of the world, especially in the light of the development of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear or otherwise.

Mr. Spellar: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the Ministry of Defence website, where he can read the speech that I made to the Atlantic Council towards the end of last year. I dealt with that matter at some length.

Sir Archie Hamilton: I am grateful to the Minister for reminding me of that. I shall get back to my personal computer as soon as possible and read his speech on the website. I am sure it is interesting, and I am sorry that it did not receive more publicity, which, I am sure, it deserved.

The only good news for the Ministry of Defence is that we are in a new financial year. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury made the point that we already seem to be moving towards a financial crisis. I hoped that there would be few months in which the Ministry of Defence could work on the assumption that it had enough money to cover its problems; I believed that only at the end of the financial year would it begin to experience the problems about which we have heard recently. However, the pressure of commitments and the need to find further so-called savings means that the Ministry of Defence continues to experience difficulties despite the new tranche of money that it should receive.

It is important to remind everyone in this country that the budget will be cut by between 3.8 per cent. between 1999–2000 and 2001–02. That is a substantial cut that follows savings by Conservative Governments. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater explained the necessity for those savings. However, we have reached the point where we cannot afford to cut the defence budget further.

I am not responsible for our policies in the next manifesto, but I should like us to guarantee that we will maintain the defence budget in real terms in the next Parliament at least. It is important to give that reassurance to our armed forces, which have been salami sliced for so long that they are finding life difficult. The savings are not helping.

The Government have trouble explaining the difference between a 3 per cent. efficiency saving and a cut. There is no satisfactory answer. The Select Committee report made it clear that the Committee was not satisfied.

The services are under strength by 8,700 trained personnel. I presume that the Government budgeted for the strength that the forces were supposed to be at, and that they are saving money by having fewer trained personnel. Is that an efficiency saving? If so, it is rather strange. I suspect that it is lumped in with efficiency savings, which are really cuts.

Like many other Conservative Members, I believe that the cuts in the Territorial Army have been extraordinary. Someone must deal with that problem. The Territorial Army's budget is included in that of the Army. Membership of the Army Board is exclusively taken up

by professional soldiers whose view of the Territorial Army is that if it is not a cheap worthwhile reserve force, it is expensive considering its capabilities. If they are given any choice between retaining a front-line, regular regiment or emasculating the Territorial Army, the latter will always suffer when the heat is on.

The only way to tackle the problem is to shift the budget for the Territorial Army, possibly to the Home Office under home defence, with a contract from the Ministry of Defence to organise and train its members. Unless we do that and if it remains a Ministry of Defence responsibility, I can tell the House that it will continue to be cut every time there are pressures on and in the MOD.

I have yet to meet a serving general who has any serious interest in the TA, although that does not prevent them from making massive use of it whenever they are in serious trouble or find themselves going to war without doctors or anyone of that sort. Then it becomes a valuable resource. If given the choice, they will always cut it and maintain regular forces in preference. We shall get away from that only if we separate the funding completely.

When we are so under strength, so grotesquely over-committed and leaning on the TA to such a degree to fill regular posts—many of which are in the infantry and out in the Balkans—it strikes me as extraordinary to cut it back, particularly the infantry, as they are the resource that we are using most. The Government have been extremely ill-advised to allow that to happen and I should have thought that we could take such a stringent view only when regular forces were fully manned and we felt that we did not need such reserves. However, we have needed them badly when we have been cutting them and that is not very clever, in anyone's language.

I am also distressed that the Government still seem to be committed to some form of European defence identity and we always seem to go through the triumph of hope over reality in terms of our European negotiations. There is no doubt that, on the whole, the record of European procurement has been pretty dismal and vast sums have been wasted because there is not the agreement and cohesion of outlook that makes such initiatives possible.

We cannot remind the House too often of our bruising experiences during the Gulf war—the support that we received from our European allies was dismal. Under the presidential constitution, the French at least had a system whereby they could decide to go to war, but other than the Mirages and the French air force, their contribution was limited. Their light tanks could only be put against an Iraqi infantry division and the aircraft carrier that they sent out did not have the power to enable fixed-wing aircraft to take off from it. Eventually, it broke down and had to go home. The Germans had tremendous problems supporting us at all and the Luftwaffe wing that was sent out to Turkey virtually mutinied so its contribution was minimal. The Italians flew a Tornado sortie, but had one shot down. They did not bother to fly again. We all know about the Belgians, who had extreme difficulty with their coalition Government and would not even sell my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater the 155 mm ammunition he needed.

Now that a certain time has passed and as we all believe in openness, we can reveal a wonderful case. The Belgian Defence Minister sent my right hon. Friend a telegram saying, "I am under a bit of pressure from all these British newspapers, which are slagging the Belgians off for not being very helpful about the war. Will you send me a telegram saying, 'Thank you very much for all the ammunition.'? If you thank me in advance I shall be extremely grateful. I'll send the ammunition later." My right hon. Friend was not born yesterday, he did not send the telegram and the ammunition never arrived. We must be very careful.

I was interested in the views of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on European defence. Usually, I find Liberals to be frightfully keen on anything to do with Europe, even if it does not add up to much, but he was so right when he said that European defence needs to be capability led. We cannot do anything to bring European countries together until they increase their defence budgets. As we know, the Europeans cut their defence budgets between 1990 and 1999—France by 23 per cent., Germany by 39 per cent., Italy by 21 per cent. and the United Kingdom by 29 per cent. Declining defence budgets are not the right backdrop for bringing people together to spend additional money to create European structures. We shall face nothing but absolute disaster if we go down that road.

Mr. Maginnis: On liaison between various countries, has the right hon. Gentleman taken on board my point about the Raytheon contribution to the beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile tender? If we went for that option, we would get technology that we do not have for free.

Sir Archie Hamilton: Yes, indeed. There is a great debate—we have had many before—about whether we should go for European technology, which has an awful long way to go in development terms, or well-tried United States technology. I have no interest either way, but the people with whom I discuss these matters say that the difference in price is some £400 million, which is a large gap on a £750 million contract. Enormous pressure to buy European will be applied on the basis that we are keeping a technological base here. For that reason, it may be difficult for Shorts to win this one.

Mr. Maginnis: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I merely want to remind him that Shorts is now fully owned by Thomson-CSF, so there is also a European dimension.

Sir Archie Hamilton: I accept that there is a European dimension, but a much more interesting aspect of procurement is the current discussion between BAE Systems and Boeing. In the past there has been the same split—the same argument about whether we go American or European—but if a monopoly defence contractor in this country is now going to establish major links with an American contractor, it is an entirely different ballgame. Much will depend on how strong those links become. If the two companies merge, the debate about whether to buy American or to buy European will change. If we wanted to look after our major defence contractor here, it would inevitably involve American technology. No doubt we can have an interesting discussion about that in the future.

As many speakers have observed, we must abandon the idea of 3 per cent. savings. I think that those savings are doing enormous damage in the MOD, that we must stabilise expenditure and stop cutting it further, and that we must do all that we can to achieve proper spending

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levels. We must also be extremely wary about the commitments that we take on in the future, because I do not think that our forces are up to meeting them all at current levels.

5.6 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton). He was a very competent Defence Minister, and was always courteous to me when I intervened and asked questions. I agree with him and others that it is easy to enter into commitments, but they often turn out to be long-haul commitments, and it is not so easy to get out.

Yesterday we debated the Post Office. About three years ago, I went on holiday to a lovely little village. The village magazine contained the obituary of a woman who had clearly been the life and soul of the village. It gave her life history, and mentioned that she had married the local postman, but the second world war had then arrived and he had been posted abroad. [*Laughter.*] A person may have been a postman or had some other job, but anyone in the armed forces is likely to be posted abroad. I apologise for that rather weak story, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Never mind; I shall continue with my speech.

I pay tribute to the Government for making important improvements in armed forces personnel policy in just three years. They have made the personnel far more professional. The document "Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy", which is available for Members to see, sets out a good framework.

Racism has been mentioned, and no doubt it still exists in the armed forces. The Conservatives have a poor record in that regard: only a report produced by the Commission for Racial Equality threatening to take them to court forced them to change their policy. There is a fantastic difference between their approach and that of the present Government, who are determined to root out racism in the forces and to establish equal opportunities. Tackling racist bullying is very important.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I know the hon. Gentleman to be fair, but I must say this to him: first, there was no policy against other races coming into the armed forces; and secondly, he should pay tribute to members of the armed forces who, mostly on their own initiative, have set about sorting out the perceived problems, particularly in the Household Division, which has been lauded by the CRE for having changed all that. It was in the hands more of the soldiers, sailors and airmen than of politicians of either side.

Mr. Cohen: I pay tribute to the new personnel and managers in the armed forces. They have fallen into line with the Government's policy to tackle racism, but that was the problem: the previous Government did not have a policy on it. The result was that the number of people from ethnic minority communities coming into the armed forces was very low. The number being retained was very low, too, because of the racism that they encountered there. I am delighted that that and, indeed, institutional racism in recruitment, retention and promotion policies, are being tackled.

The Government set a goal to recruit 3 per cent. from ethnic minority communities in 1999–2000, rising annually by 1 per cent. to 5 per cent. by the end of 2001–02. I was disappointed that, in answer to my intervention, the Minister had to admit that that target had not been met, although there has been a significant increase, to which he alluded.

I want to give an overview of the figures. In 1997–98, 0.9 per cent of the Royal Navy's recruits were from ethnic minority communities; in the Army, the figure was 1.4 per cent; and in the RAF it was 1 per cent. In 1998–99, the Government's first full year in office, recruitment from those communities was 1.6 per cent. in the Royal Navy, 2 per cent. in the Army and 1.4 per cent. in the RAF.

There is sure to have been an improvement this year, which will at least get us close to the 3 per cent. target, but I am disappointed that it has not been met. I ask the Minister to look at the matter because there are higher targets next year and action needs to be taken to ensure that they are met.

There are good pilot projects, but they are moving too slowly. They need to be extended to other areas with large ethnic minority communities, including my area. There are potential recruits in the borough of Waltham Forest. More recruits from the Asian community could easily be picked up for the armed forces—for the armed forces' benefit, I might add.

Role models remain important. There are just not enough of them high enough up in the armed forces, acting as a beacon and an attraction for others to come in, and perhaps try to emulate people such as General Colin Powell in the United States. I hope that we can get some role models as part of that process.

Recruitment of women is a success story. The percentage of women in the armed forces has risen. In 1999, it was about 7.6 per cent., but I note that there is no target on the proportion of women in the armed forces. I urge the Government to set such a target. It should go to 10 per cent. at an early time and move up to double the present level—perhaps to 15 per cent—within a relatively short time.

Some of the increasing commitments that we are talking about are peacekeeping commitments. Women are ideally placed in the armed forces to play an important part in that peacekeeping role. I am concerned that women are being kept out of some parts of the service. The present Government have increased the number of roles in which women can serve. Before they came to office, only 45 per cent. of roles could be filled by women; now, they can serve in 70 per cent of roles. That means that women still cannot serve in 30 per cent. of service roles. I believe that most, but not all, of the roles in that 30 per cent. involve what might be called direct killing—which the Minister, in his speech, using a more polite term, called high-intensity war-fighting operations. Although I appreciate the sensitivity of the issue, I suspect that some of the attitudes of those who want to keep women out of those parts of the armed forces may be outdated. I am also worried that denying women the training necessary to fill those roles could hamper their long-term career prospects.

Both men and women should have a choice in whether they fill direct-killing roles. Men and women who wish to fill such a role should also undergo screening to ensure

that they are suitable. The issue should be kept under constant review, especially as all personnel—even those filling "basic" roles—need to have self-defence skills, such as tackling snipers and armed thugs. Any service man or woman could, unfortunately, be placed in a situation in which he or she has to kill someone. All service people have to have that training.

I do not think that women should be excluded from the elite units. One old-fashioned argument—I think that it is old-fashioned—is that men in those units might hesitate to act if women were present, with perhaps fatal consequences. I do not accept that argument. Such a consequence could be avoided by a suitable training regime. The Israeli army, for example, has had women in combat roles for very many years. I do not accept that women should be automatically excluded from any service role.

Peacekeeping has been mentioned in the debate. Perhaps we should establish in our armed forces a gendarmerie or carabinieri-type force, which is half military and half police. Such a body could play an important part in the type of roles that we are now playing. It is not appropriate to expect simply to leave it to the French or Italians to play that role. The Government should conduct a proper review of that possibility and provide a report on it to the House.

I certainly welcome the Government's "Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy" document, which states:

> An organisation the size of the Armed Forces (which employs over 200,000 people and which spends over £6 billion per annum on serving military personnel) should have a visionary statement setting out its approach to its people.

I am not sure that the strategy is that visionary in setting out the forces' approach to personnel, but it is a significant step forward. It provides the basis for professionalism in personnel management in the armed forces and for improvement in other spheres, with which I shall deal later.

The document is a bit technical in parts, but, crucially, it deals with what it calls "tolerable variation", which it defines as

> Centre-led personnel policies which apply to two or more single Services, although elements of the application of the policies might vary in one or more Service.

It also states that directions from the centre should not be "overly prescriptive". I agree with that. They should not be excessive, and there should be flexibility between the centre and the individual.

Gaps must not appear as between the service and central personnel units, where each says that the other has responsibility. We need transparency, and the reasons for variations must be given in the public domain. I am in a small minority in this House, but I favour trade union representation for armed forces personnel, although without the strike option. That would be the best way forward.

We must continue to improve the complaints procedure, because the armed forces can get into trouble if complaints are not dealt with properly. The document deals with education policies, and my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) paid tribute to the Government's improvements, with national vocational qualifications and skills training. However, there is a need for substantial improvements in education policy. The armed forces may not think that this relates to their job, but many people who come into the armed forces are unable to read and write. When they leave, they should be able to read and write, which is also important when orders are given. Overall, improvements are being made in education.

The report signals individual areas, four of which in particular need detailed review: welfare; families; personal health; and health and safety policies. I hope that there will be a full-scale review of each of these matters, to follow up the "Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy" policy document.

The veterans advice unit is to be welcomed, and I pay tribute to the Government for setting that up. I welcome also the bereaved families policy, which will be led from the centre. I hope that that will lead to a more sensitive and generous approach when there has been loss of life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley said that those in the Falklands had to pay £1 a minute for telephone conversations with their loved ones. That is unacceptable, and although it has changed, it is still too high. The Government have increased the telephone allowance, which is now up to 20 free minutes a week for those serving in Bosnia and the Gulf. The figure was only three minutes when the Government came into office. The amount of time has been extended in Kosovo as well. I believe that it could be increased again—to 30 minutes, for example. The Select Committee has pointed out that the change in policy in Kosovo made

> a significant contribution to improved morale,

so there is a case for that extension.

We need to develop the use of e-mail links. The Minister said that significant progress has been made, but I would like more. Other armed forces are doing more than we are, although we now have the electronic bluey so that messages can get directly to soldiers in theatre. There should be more. Wherever the armed forces deploy, there should be a well-stocked computer centre.

The Ministry of Defence should develop its own internet service provider—armedforces.co.uk—to give service personnel easy access to communication with their loved ones, in addition to telephone access. That would be a cheaper way of communicating, certainly in the long term.

The Government should consider issuing e-mail mobile phones to armed forces personnel. I understand that there is also a need for secure communication in certain circumstances. There is room for improvement. The previous Government had an even worse record on communications or basic operations. They made a mess of the Bowman contract. Technology moves on and the MOD must do better in keeping up with it without spending the earth.

The Government have a good story to tell overall on personnel policies for the armed forces. They have improved on the situation under the Conservative Government. They could do better still. With the overarching personnel strategy, they have a mechanism by which to do so.

5.27 pm

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I do not propose to dwell on the problems that have afflicted the armed services over the past few years. All of us who have read the Select Committee's report know that it

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makes pretty grim reading, and since its publication we have heard further examples of overstretch: the cancellation of exercises, with its impact on training; shortage of pilots; the poor quality of some of the equipment; and, last but by no means least, the cuts in the Territorial Army.

The presence of the armed forces is not as visible as it used to be. If we want to encourage the voluntary spirit—which we do, because we do not choose to have conscription—the worst thing that we can do is to attack the TA. Those part-time voluntary soldiers can be committed to service abroad. We know examples of that. The current policy is very short-sighted. We know where some of the problem lies. I did service in the Ministry of Defence, as a junior Minister under Lord Carrington, and in the Army, and I have seen how the TA can be kicked around or shunted aside for a time until something serious happens, while the Regular Army gets on with the job. Still, that is old politics and we cannot help it.

Morale is affected not only by overstretch, equipment and training, but by the perception that we have of the role of the armed services and the unity of purpose that they share with our allies. It is very important to have the right framework in which to operate with a will. That applies equally to the civilian population, who after all need to be convinced that the money spent on the armed forces is spent in the right context. That depends, even more than before the second world war, on an alliance between countries that share similar objectives.

I want to say a few words about the defence structure that has been formulated by NATO and its impact on the armed forces as we adjust to the post-cold war world. I remain very much involved with NATO, as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and I have had various appointments there, so I am an Atlanticist, but that does not make me anti-European. I want both Government and Opposition Members to understand that.

The European contribution is in need of repair. We know that. The European members of NATO, as we were reminded some months ago, spend 60 per cent. of what the United States of America spends, but—and this is a shocking fact—their capacity to project military force is about 10 per cent. to 15 per cent. of Washington's. It is obvious we are not getting value for money, and I wonder what impact those facts will have on personnel and on the NATO structure, which so far has proved itself to be the most successful military alliance in modern history.

For some years, American politicians have asked me when we have met, "What are you guys doing to help the alliance?" They have rightly urged European members of the alliance to do more. I shall not go through the statistics of various countries, but like us they have cut back on defence. They have cut even more savagely and I do not believe that they get good value for money as a result. Their forces have become less and less effective in meeting modern conditions.

The Balkan crisis obliged us to direct more of our attention to conflict prevention and crisis management. The British are especially good at that. I remember being involved in peacekeeping and peacemaking, and it was amazing how well disciplined and trained the blokes I worked with were. Our ability in those areas attracts the admiration and respect of those who have worked with the British troops in such places as Bosnia, Herzegovina and elsewhere.

The limited effect that Europe has had on the world scene has been mainly confined to creating peacekeeping and peacemaking initiatives on the continent of Europe. Out of that comes the view that we should be able to be more creative in the work we do and to play a greater part should some more serious problem arise, inside or outside Europe. We should also work more harmoniously and creatively with our American allies.

The Cologne summit that took place recently has generated the concern that the EU is embarking on a path that could lead to the violation of the three Ds for the European security and defence initiative adumbrated by Secretary of State Allbright—no duplication, no discrimination and no decoupling. We can take some comfort that a breach in the cohesiveness of the alliance is not contemplated by the Secretary General of NATO, Lord Robertson, who is a former Secretary of State for Defence. He has frequently cited the three Is in contrast to some of the pessimistic views that have been expressed about the future of the ESDI. The three Is are the indivisibility of transatlantic security, the improvement of European capabilities and the inclusiveness of all European allies in the process. I have no doubt that that is his intention and I know many people in Europe, such as Members of the European Parliament and others involved in defence, who believe that that is the intention. However, if we are to achieve the respect of the public and, above all, the armed services, we must ask how the cohesiveness that has stood us in such stead since NATO was formed will be maintained.

The EU consists only of European countries and has a common foreign and security policy. That is all laid down in the various agreements since its formation and is bound to reflect the different perspectives on regional, transatlantic and global matters that are central to solidarity. Within Europe are countries which are members of NATO but not of the EU, and members of the EU which are not members of NATO. That is one of the weakness of the ESDI and it could founder on that rock. The EU should not forget that there is more to a European security and defence initiative than just including its own member states.

General Klaus Naumann, the former chairman of NATO's permanent military committee, whom I met on a number of occasions, has frequently asserted that efforts to create a European security defence identify have been troubled by too many institutions and too little substance, too many meetings and study papers and too few concrete steps forward in terms of capabilities. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and others have also pointed that out in this debate. As members of the European Union we must ask ourselves whether we are going to concentrate our efforts only on dealing with the structures, or whether we will grasp the nettle and improve our capability.

Using the well-proven structures of NATO seems to be the best path to follow, rather than trying to create any rival institution. Members of the European Parliament whom I have met, and representatives who serve at an administrative level, have told me that that is not their intention. Our Government says so too. However, the temptation to divert our interests away from the Atlantic community and to concentrate as European nations on

what we think are the problems at our back door may look to a continental European like the best way to preserve stability and defend the rights of Europeans. However, that does not seem to be so to those across the Atlantic.

Above all, we need to be assured that that alliance, which has been so successful, will continue to attract the support and loyalty of our armed forces. When we praise them, we must not neglect the fact that one reason why they have given their service so unstintingly and with courage and initiative, from the generals to the lowest private, is because they not only know that their cause is a good one—both in the cold war and afterwards—but they have had the right structure, which has enabled them to fulfil their capabilities. That is the message that we have to learn.

5.37 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): It is an honour to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith), with his years of experience, which extend back to the end of the second world war and his time as a Minister. I will not repeat his arguments, but hon. Members on both sides of the House should listen with respect to his lessons about the substance and structure of the European defence initiative and the extent to which the emphasis is on the wrong one of the two. I firmly agree with him.

I welcome one part of the Minister's speech. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) I felt that the speech was good in parts and I congratulate the Government on the families taskforce. I called unsuccessfully for such an operation on many occasions when I was a Government Back Bencher. It is thoroughly worth while and costs extremely little. If other Departments think about armed forces families when they are deliberating on health, education or whatever, it will have a value to those families that will be much appreciated.

None the less, I am profoundly at odds with the Government over the direction of defence policy; my colleagues have alluded to some of the reasons. Whenever the Opposition—whoever happens to be in opposition—criticise the armed forces, the Government of the day promptly say, "You are knocking our armed forces." What I am about to say is not an exercise in knocking our armed forces; far from it. I was proud to be a territorial for 13 years, my father was a regular soldier, and my grandfather served as a regular in the first world war and a territorial in the second. I believe, however, that our armed forces are not in a position to defend this country from some of the threats that it may face. In rightly expressing pride in the qualities of our individual service men, we easily forget that in the lifetime of many people in this country, the British Army was convincingly defeated. Churchill was right in this Chamber in 1940. He was speaking for many people who, like himself, were first world war veterans, when he said that it was a pretty poor day when this country was cheering over a successful evacuation. That is what Dunkirk was, of course—an evacuation in which we had even abandoned most of our heavy weapons.

The challenges today are, in some respects, quite different from what faced us then. In other respects, there are parallels. In 1914, as little as six weeks before the war began, we did not expect to be fighting a war in Europe. Most right hon. and hon. Members will know of the famous leader in *The Times*, which started with the words:

> This empire faces the most severe threat for generations

and then went on to talk about the situation in Ireland. I do not mean to downplay the situation in Ireland, which was grave. Yet a few weeks later, we were bogged down in the first world war.

Some right hon. and hon. Members will have read the recently published book on Stalingrad. It reminds us that to the total amazement of the Russians, Axis forces numbering 4 million soldiers crossed their border with only a few weeks warning from their intelligence, which their politicians, including Stalin, continued to disbelieve even after the first deployments had taken place.

It may be said that this was all a long time ago. However, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) reminded us that just a few days before Saddam Hussein chose to invade the Gulf, there was no thought of a Gulf war in anyone's mind. Yet within months, armed forces numbering three quarters of a million had to be put together in a hurry. Fortunately, America produced two thirds of the manpower. Next time, America is much less likely to be willing to do that. However, it has retained a structure in which it can expand enormously.

There is an old adage that history never reveals the "what ifs"—what would have happened if things had turned out differently. None the less, it was interesting to ask, in the Select Committee on Defence, what we would have done if we had had to mount a land operation in Kosovo. There is a danger that history may just reveal that "what if" if the situation in Montenegro, south-west Serbia or even in Kosovo takes an unexpected and unpleasant direction. I opposed sending troops there, but with many thousands of British and allied troops tied up in Kosovo, we may still discover the "what if".

We were told that we would need to put together 55,000 British soldiers in a hurry. We were told that within four weeks, if I remember rightly—other sources suggest that it was as little as two weeks—we would have to decide whether to deploy. A quarter of those troops would have been reservists, including large numbers of infantry and sappers—the two groups that took the largest cuts in the Territorial Army.

The "what if" question on Kosovo concerns me, but it is not what concerns me most. In an earlier intervention, I quoted the first of the 23 conclusions of the American report that was published in September, commissioned by the Pentagon, with the agreement of both Houses of Congress as well as the President. It was that Americans were likely to face severe threats on American soil within their planning horizon. That was alluding to the spreading of weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical and biological—not only to rogue states but to terrorist organisations.

Let us suppose for a moment that we face a direct threat from a rogue state or terrorist organisation. On other occasions, my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) has talked about ballistic missile defence, but I want to concentrate on the conventional aspects.

In this example, let us suppose that Iran happens to be the country mounting the threat. In the Iran-Iraq war, it showed that it could raise enormous armies—not terribly

[Mr. Julian Brazier]

well equipped or trained, but huge and willing to take extremely heavy casualties. Large areas of the country are covered in what might be called a reinforced concrete jungle. Whole cities are made of such structures.

Let us further suppose in this example that Britain faces a nuclear threat. It is known that Iran is developing nuclear weapons and that it is hand in glove with North Korea. Indeed, it is alleged that the Iranians paid for the North Korean missile development programme. Let us suppose finally that a weapon has been detonated from an Iranian source.

Would it be possible to break into such a country, given the sheer scale of the forces that the allies would have to put together? Do we really think that America would provide 90 per cent. of the air sorties, as happened in the Balkans? We must bear in mind that America's gross domestic product and population are smaller than Europe's. Most importantly, can we expect it to provide two thirds of the manpower required, as happened in the Gulf?

America would say that, proportionately, its professional force is broadly similar to Britain's—its population is four or five times the size of ours, and its regular armed forces are about five times the size of ours. However, America has an enormous reserve structure. Behind its 10 regular army divisions, it can call out 13 national guard divisions.

Britain had pitifully tiny manpower reserves at the last election, and infantry numbers have been more than halved since then. We cannot call out a single infantry battalion from the Territorial Army. The 15 so-called TA infantry battalions, which are all that remain of the 33 that existed before, are not really battalions at all, as everyone serving in the infantry knows. They are little groupings of companies that are not even real companies because they do not have sufficient manpower, and there is no proper headquarters structure at all. The result is that Britain can no longer put a large army together.

It has already been said that the Government appear to have lost sight of the fact that defence of the country and its vital interests is their prime role. Instead, the Government's strategic defence review in effect rules out that role. The Government are committed to a programme of overseas operations that range from peacekeeping to expeditionary forces in wars that, by implication, are wars of choice.

Britain might have to take part in an expeditionary force that must fight for the very life of the country. The task might be to stamp out a nuclear threat from a third-world country that had already started to deploy and use nuclear weapons. That is what the Americans think might be required. If such a country were to direct its attention solely to Europe, it is possible that a future American Government with an isolationist bent might not want to mount an invasion.

The solution does not lie in trying to develop structures in Europe that would be an alternative to NATO. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden argued so convincingly, the solution lies in increasing defence spending in western European countries so that we can have credible armed forces again.

It is true that a very good professional core remains, but years of cuts in the money made available to that core will progressively undermine it. If the cuts continue to be targeted mainly on collective training—and the Minister was good enough to recognise that that was a problem—the professional standard will not remain very good for long but will drop quite fast. However, even that professional core is of little value in fighting a real war if there is no means to expand and sustain it.

There are implications for equipment as well as personnel. I recognise that this is a debate on personnel, but I cannot pass over making one quick point about equipment. In the Kosovo operation we were up against a small enemy. That was Serbia, with a population of a few million, against NATO as a whole. Yet unbelievably, we ran out of weapons of certain categories, such was the paucity of our ammunition stocks—and it is Government policy still further to reduce them in some areas.

Precisely the same points that can be made about manpower can be made about equipment. A war cannot be fought without an industrial ability to sustain an equipment effort. In the same way, a war cannot be fought without the ability to sustain the manpower side of the effort. The closure of the royal ordnance factory at Bishopton and the loss of the ability to produce propellants for ammunition was the tip of the iceberg. If we focus our procurement effort on a value-for-money programme that is based, for example, on the number of tanks, guns and aeroplanes that we have in the shop window, and we fail to spend money on keeping surge capability within our industries—unnecessary in peace time but critical in war—we will ultimately reduce our armed forces to a toy. If they do not have the ammunition to sustain their efforts, they will not be able to sustain a war.

I shall spend three or four minutes dealing with specific points of detail on reserve forces. I hesitate to talk about the Royal Auxiliary Air Force in the presence of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), who knows so much more about it than I do and who will be speaking next. However, although I welcome the experiment that the Government are carrying out with fast-jet fighter pilots, I suggest that they are wasting their time unless they introduce formed units that are commanded by volunteer reserve commanders, otherwise the cultural struggle between those who are professionals and those whom the professionals perceive as having left to go to comfortable civilian jobs and return for sport flying at the weekend, will continue to create tensions.

The reason why the US air national guard is such a success and has a turnover so much smaller than that of the US reserve air force is that it has formed units. They are given tasks and are sent abroad as formed units—to play their role in the Balkans and the Gulf, for example.

I alluded earlier to the wrong shape of our infantry battalions. None of them is a real battalion and none could be used as one in the short term, because of their present structure. There is a different problem with the more specialist units. I referred to them when intervening on the Minister and he kindly said that he would come back to me. I shall stay with the Royal Corps of Signals as an example.

In the old days, signals units were in signals brigades. The commanding officer of a signals unit is all too often a regular officer. I do not mean that offensively, but volunteer reserve soldiers are usually best commanded by volunteer reserve commanders. In days past, the

commanding officer had his confidential report, on which his career depended, written by a Royal Signals brigade commander. The professionalism of a specialised signals unit in carrying out tasks of considerable complexity was being assessed by a signals brigadier.

No doubt I will receive a letter—carefully researched, as Ministers' letters always are—assuring me that such structures are still in place. However, there has been a critical change that is deeply resented by Territorial Army officers within the Royal Signals. It is that those units have been grouped into regional brigades commanded by generalist brigadiers—I do not mean that offensively—who have no specialist knowledge of what troops equipped with Ptarmigan, for example, are up to. These brigadiers write the first part of the confidential reports. There has also been a reduction in the number of permanent staff and in the number of man training days. The combined effect of all that must be that specialist standards in such units will fall.

My final point is to pick up briefly on an issue raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton). He argued that there should be a separate vote for reserve forces, and that it should come under another Department. I do not think that that is practical. However, we need to introduce the same type of senior officer structure in our reserve forces as they have in countries with reserve forces such as Australia, America, Canada and Switzerland. The absence of reserve generals to give direct advice on reserve matters to Ministers creates the problem in this country. It has led to the disproportionate cuts to which my right hon. and hon. Friends have referred.

I end my remarks where I began them. We lose sight of the purpose of our armed forces when we convert them into an organisation designed for peacekeeping and expeditionary wars of choice. The prime purpose of defence is to defend this country and its vital interests.

5.56 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I shall be brief. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) made a vigorous and admirable speech, but I take issue with him on one point only. He said that the Minister for the Armed Forces made a very good contribution, but I thought it was too sanguine and I fear that it verged on the complacent. Although the quality of our armed forces is quite exceptional, their quantity is wholly inadequate—there are only 210,000 regular personnel. In the Kosovo war, Royal Air Force air crews won more Distinguished Service Orders and Distinguished Flying Crosses than in any conflict since world war two, and no one can doubt the commitment of our personnel. However, we must address the problem of retention to make sure that we have balanced and experienced armed forces that will achieve best performance on a continuing basis.

Members have spoken about shorter tour intervals in the Army and the long separations endured by sea-going personnel in the Navy, and pointed out that offensive support squadrons of, particularly, the Royal Air Force are abroad for long periods of time. The effect of that is exemplified by the fact that the fast-jet force of the Royal Air Force is 20 per cent. short and the Royal Navy Harrier force is 30 per cent. short. They are serious deficiencies.

We should consider the total force concept. That is why I was so pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) spoke as they did. The concept of reserves is important, because we cannot consider personnel policy for the armed forces without considering the reserves. We should also consider European engagement through the European defence initiative, which will increasingly determine the nature of our defence policy.

The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) made an interesting and original speech and she recognised that the armed forces are a community apart. However, despite what she said, their distinct nature needs to be nurtured and encouraged and they need special treatment on pay and allowances. That is the bedrock of the problem. They do not receive sufficient financial and material compensation for the serious sacrifices that they make on our behalf.

That point was brought home to me by the phasing out of the London allowance, an issue that effects my constituency. I put down a parliamentary question on 20 March and received a long, courteous and detailed reply from the Minister for the Armed Forces. The London allowance, which compensated service men for the additional costs of living in London, has been withdrawn, with a transitional period, with effect from 1 April this year.

It is true that a recruitment and retention allowance was introduced on 1 April 1997, but that does not compensate those personnel who, since 1997, have resided continuously in London and whose service obligations require them to remain in London. That can mean that personnel in outer London—for example, at RAF Northolt in my constituency—who do not live in their own property might lose £45 a month. Personnel serving in outer London, but living in their own property, could lose £110 a month. All those figures were spelled out in the Minister's letter to me.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) referred to a similar problem. He spoke about the vagaries of the overseas allowances system. Personnel normally stationed in Germany, who serve in the Balkans, suffer cuts in their overseas allowances, notwithstanding the difficult conditions in which they have to operate in that theatre.

It is imperative that the House does everything possible to emphasise that good conditions of service are vital. We do our best, but the armed forces personnel debate is not the right structure for that. As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) pointed out, we still need our single service debates. May I suggest, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we hold such debates in Westminster Hall? That would be an ideal forum; we could sit in our hemicycle. We all care about our individual services and those of our constituents who are members of them. It would be an appropriate atmosphere in which to address the problems.

Of course, we need international forums, such as the North Atlantic Assembly, of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden is a member, and the Western European Union Assembly, of which I have had the privilege to be a member. As the WEU is absorbed into the European Union and its Assembly becomes the European Defence and Security Assembly, it will be more than ever important that national parliamentarians continue to sit on the EDSA. Through their defence committees, debates and access to their Defence

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

Ministers, they will be able to ensure that their defence budgets are adequate and that the problems of personnel and policy are properly addressed.

It is important for Her Majesty's Government to respond positively, as the French Defence Minister has done. A press release of 7 April, following his meeting with Mr. Bühler, the President of the WEU Assembly, stated:

> According to Minister Richard, the structures of the WEU and in particular the WEU Assembly offer the real advantage of involving all European countries—

that was the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden—

> (the 28 WEU countries and, he suggested, possibly Malta and Cyprus in the future) in a uniquely "inclusive" forum.

I am sure that phrase will appeal to Her Majesty's Government.

I have 10 suggestions for improving the lot of our armed forces personnel. First, bounties should be payable at regular intervals for those who stay on—rather than paying gratuities to those who leave. Secondly, the Government should consider instituting personal, portable pensions for service men. There should be a funded pension scheme. Over time, that would permit more funds to be devoted to purely defence uses. Thirdly, there should be more generous education allowances for service men. The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) rightly mentioned that in his speech.

Fourthly, there should be substantial investment in defence medical services, from which regulars and reservists ought to be allowed to benefit. Fifthly, there should be a joining bounty for regulars who join the reserves—a golden hello for regulars who stay on in reservist service—because we need their experience. Sixthly, recipients of the reserve forces decoration—the reserves do not have post denominationals—ought to have a bounty as a tangible sign that they not only are valued but will be rewarded for their service over many years.

Seventhly, we should increase specialist pay, particularly for categories of personnel such as aircrew who are in short supply. Eighthly, there should be a statutory right to council accommodation. Local authorities should be required to provide social housing, whether through the council or through housing associations, for ex-regular personnel who settle in their area. Next, we should introduce housing allowances. Many service men have so many commitments that they are unable to save enough to provide a permanent home for their families. If they had a housing allowance to enable them to do so, they would be less likely to leave the services early.

Last but not least—this point is debatable—those units that are recruiting well and which are up to their manning levels should be allowed to form additional battalions. Obviously, I have in mind the Gurkhas, but it could apply to other units. Units that do not recruit well and which fall seriously below their manning levels could be temporarily disbanded. In the Royal Air Force we have a system whereby squadrons are regularly formed, disbanded and reformed. It would be possible for the Army to be more flexible.

I hope that some of those suggestions are useful, and I welcome the chance to speak in the debate.

6.7 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Rarely does a week go by without our being reminded of what we owe to our service men, past and present, and today is no exception. *The Times* carries the obituary of Rear-Admiral Douglas Parker, my constituent and a member of my constituency association. It sets out his record, saying that he was

> the first British aviator to overfly and attack the Japanese mainland

towards the end of the war. He won the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Service Cross for the fierce fighting in which he was involved at Okinawa. Earlier in the war, he was in the thick of the furious Operation Pedestal fight, the convoy that saved Malta.

That generation is getting to the age at which increasingly we expect to read their obituaries, so there will, sadly, be no shortage of such splendid records to remind us of all that we owe them.

It is a privilege for me to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), whom I first met in 1970 when I was an Oxford undergraduate and he was already an MP and, even then, an expert on defence by virtue of his RAF background. He was fighting then for strong defences for this country, and he has never wavered in that fight to this day.

I take this opportunity to thank the Under-Secretary, who has attended almost all of the debate, for his recent letter to me indicating that he will seriously investigate the case of Corporal Henry, the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts). Corporal Henry committed suicide after what seems to have been an extremely unjust court martial and disproportionate punishment.

In the short time available I want to do what I generally do in such debates, which is to say something about people, something about problems and something about the past. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) did Parliament a favour in drawing attention to the questionable value of dispensing with single-service debates and replacing them with separate debates on personnel, equipment, and so forth—not that that has prevented hon. Members from bringing into the debate whatever it was they had to say about our armed forces, whether or not it had to do with personnel.

In our previous debate on armed forces personnel, on 1 July last year, I drew attention to the campaign waged by the Officers Pension Society, urging that pensions be transferred to the widows of officers who married after retiring from the services. Today, I shall concentrate on an even more worthy cause that was drawn to my attention by my constituent, Mr. Trevor Emans of Holbury, who was shocked to read about the way in which St. Dunstan's—the charity for service men and women who have been blinded in the service of their country—had been refused a lottery grant.

Let me tell the House about St. Dunstan's. It was founded in 1915 by Sir Arthur Pearson, of the newspaper publishing family, in the belief that those who came back from the first world war blinded should be cared for with the greatest commitment that society could afford, not reduced to beggary in the streets. St. Dunstan's takes in service men and women aged 19 to 90, even if blindness is a delayed effect of their service. It teaches those men

and women how to manage basic daily tasks, and those who are of employable age are taught to master a trade, from shopkeeping to the handling of computers. Then they are shown how to re-enter communities.

St. Dunstan's has about 11 welfare officers who visit St. Dunstaners, as they are called, at home or at work. The aim is to make those people, to whom we owe so much, as independent as possible and to enable them to live as fulfilled a life as possible. The charity owns about 500 properties, mostly two-bedroom bungalows; and there are about 2,600 people on the books, including a limited number of spouses, widows or widowers of St. Dunstaners and about 30 to 40 dependent children. The charity's main base is at Ovingdean near Brighton, but 95 per cent. of the gallant veterans for whom it cares live in their own homes.

St. Dunstan's lost its last veteran of world war one only in 1998, at the age of 99. He was cared for by that charity from 1916 to 1998. Not many charities offer, as part of their raison d'être, such long-term care for anyone. Therein lies the source of the problem. Seventy per cent. of the people for whom the charity cares were injured in world war two, and the other 30 per cent. in the post-war era. The problem is that long-term care such as St. Dunstan's provides must, to a considerable extent, be funded from the interest derived from investments. It is easy for critics to point out that the charity has about £90 million in assets—which it has had—and so does not need help. However, those assets cannot be dispensed with: they pay for the buildings and are, above all, used for the investment income that provides only one third of the value of the support the charity gives to the 2,600 St. Dunstaners on its books.

At the time when the request was made to the national lottery, St. Dunstan's was hoping to extend its rehabilitation and training unit and to install specialist accommodation for those receiving rehabilitation and training, such as the handless blind—think about that: the handless blind. The charity was hoping to get a new bus that would have on board the sort of toilet facilities and wheelchair access facilities that would enable the more severely disabled St. Dunstaners to go on trips from which they are currently excluded.

I do not know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether you were present at Prime Minister's Question Time on 3 November last, but I was, and I do not think that I have ever seen the Prime Minister so discomfited. It is to the credit of Liberal Democrat Members that he was. The hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) had drawn Question 2, and this is what he asked:

> The millennium dome . . . entails the expenditure of £758 million. Of that, £399 million is from the lottery. How does the Prime Minister square with that the fact that St. Dunstan's, which cares for those who have been blinded in the service of their country, has applied . . . for lottery grants and has not received any?

The Prime Minister replied:

> I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that four fifths of the lottery stream goes to a host of other lottery causes. I cannot comment on the particular cause to which the hon. Gentleman draws attention.

At that moment, the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), whom I am delighted to see in his place at this debate, made a timely sedentary intervention. "Make inquiries then," he shouted across the Chamber, stinging the Prime Minister into the following response:

> I am happy to make inquiries, but it is not for me to distribute lottery money. That is done by the relevant organisation.—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 290.]

For once, that was a new Labour promise that was apparently not broken. Within nine days of that exchange in the Chamber, something very interesting happened. The chief fundraiser for St. Dunstan's was invited on to the "You and Yours" programme on Friday 12 November 1999, only to be, as he described it subsequently, raped on radio by John Waite.

I do not know why that person was invited on to the programme at that time in order for it to present a deeply hostile and one-sided attack on St. Dunstan's, arguing that the charity was far too wealthy and did not need lottery money. That was done, incidentally, in a pre-recorded slot that the person who was interviewed on the programme was forbidden to hear in advance. I do not know whether that timing was sheer coincidence, or whether it was yet another favour that the BBC was doing for its new Labour friends—

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Disgraceful.

Dr. Lewis: If they are honest with themselves, hon. Members in all parts of the House will, as my right hon. Friend rightly says, consider that disgraceful.

The charity does not have the money to carry out a roof replacement scheme, which means that its large swimming bath at the main establishment at Ovingdean cannot be used, even though it is both recreational and designed for hydrotherapy. It cannot be used for fear of masonry falling on the people using it. That is a desperate situation, and it is a no-fault situation. The building is simply suffering from the form of concrete cancer that has affected so many structures put up in the 1960s.

St. Dunstan's also needs specialist bathrooms. There was no chance of getting them without that money, but now the charity is to try again. There is reason for hope. The Charity Commissioners have all along been carefully monitoring the situation, to determine whether St. Dunstan's was too wealthy to go on raising money. They decided some years back that it was, but subsequently realised that the charity did need to go on raising money, once its reserves ran down.

The Charity Commissioners have just agreed that, from 2 March, St. Dunstan's can expand its activities to include those people who were in the services and have become seriously visually impaired, virtually to the point of blindness, even if that is not directly attributable to being in action. As a condition, the Charity Commissioners said that St. Dunstan's must ring-fence its existing resources so that only those formerly served by the charity will receive the interest from them. The National Lottery Charities Board therefore has an opportunity to do a U-turn and make amends belatedly for its previous insensitive and unacceptable refusal.

I want to refer briefly to one more event. On 1 June, the unveiling ceremony of a new national memorial to the 6,000 members of the Fleet Air Arm who laid down their lives in defence of this country will take place in Victoria embankment gardens. I know that the House is well aware of the importance of that good cause because I had the privilege of tabling an early-day motion before Armistice

[Dr. Lewis]

day last year when I gathered 100 signatures from all parties in 48 hours. It was retabled as early-day motion 16 and it now has 137 signatures.

We all pay routine obeisance to the memories of those who died, but I want to conclude by referring to one of the incidents that involved 13 of those 6,000 people who lost their lives. They are the 13 Swordfish aircrew who lost their lives on 12 February 1942 when 18 airmen in six Swordfish attacked the German battle-cruiser fleet that was sailing up the English channel from Brest to the safety of German waters.

The deed is well known but is diminishing in the public perception as time goes by. If pushed, most people could remember that Eugene Esmonde, the leader of the squadron, was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross. On the day before his last flight, he had been invested with the Distinguished Service Order for being the first man to torpedo the Bismarck.

When the aeroplanes went in, the crews knew that they had no chance. Their top speed was just 90 knots, the battle fleet was sailing away from them at 30 knots, and they were easy targets. I conclude with the account by Terence Robertson of what faced the last three aircraft. He writes:

> They crossed the outer screen, approached the inner, losing height. Struggling to fly, bodies in ribbons, wings like skeletons with the struts showing bare and crews who must not only be wounded but dead or dying, they crossed the line of destroyers and met the smoky spumes of water thrown up by the heavy ships' "water-spout" barrage . . . It is officially presumed that they dropped their torpedoes before the end. In this event it must also be assumed that they came out from that horrible cascade of cordite and water with the mask of death already set on their faces as they followed Eugene Esmonde into the Narrow Sea.
>
> Neither the three Swordfish nor the nine youngsters who manned them were ever seen again.

We will remember them and the others of the 6,000 on 1 June.

6.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I apologise for not having been present throughout the debate, although I heard the opening speeches. One reason for my absence was my participation in the Northern Ireland Grand Committee. Hon. Members will understand the pressures under which we work.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak briefly about armed services personnel. I am especially pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who spoke extremely well, especially about the debt that we owe to others. That is too easily forgotten in modern society.

I shall not speak about the need to increase defence spending, although it exists. I shall not speak of overstretch or overcommitment. I shall not talk about undermanning. Instead, I shall concentrate on the reasons for the problem with recruitment and retention, and why people join and stay in the armed forces.

The Minister commented on how he is addressing the disincentives to service life. Although he made some useful points, he may have missed one or two. I shall elaborate. When I joined the Army in 1974, a fifth of my graduate course had been to Oxford university and some had been to Cambridge or others. If one is allowed to say so in these politically correct, non-elitist times, there were people from good, established universities and people who had had other opportunities. I trust that good graduates from good universities still join the armed forces, but they are attracted elsewhere by enormous City bonuses and dot.com companies, which we probably do not understand. Of course money is an issue, but it was in 1974 when I joined and many people say that the disincentive is the status and perception of the armed forces in society.

We know that the armed forces are still highly regarded—one has only to think of their work in Bosnia and Kosovo to know that—but I am always amazed when Members from other parties, particularly those on the left of the Labour party, say, "We should get the British Army in here. It would do the job so much better." I was particularly struck by that in Macedonia and Albania, where the Army did a good job. The forces are extremely good, but the issue is status and their treatment by society and the Government who employ them.

I have some brief points to make. I did two tours in Northern Ireland and saw friends killed out there. I went to too many funerals. Like the Royal Ulster Constabulary, many who served wonder whether it was worth it: British soldiers go to court charged with murder for doing what they believed to be their duty, whereas Adams and McGuinness get into government. We all know that they have been and probably still are on the IRA Council. I cannot speak for others, but I know that it hurts ordinary British soldiers to see people involved in terrorism admitted to government. Funnily enough, most service people would say, "All right, that is acceptable. It is a political decision and we will go that far for peace." However, that is but one problem. The second is the ethos of the armed forces.

The forces are different. They are fed up to the back teeth with political correctness and being told, "Gosh, you soldiers, sailors and airmen are marvellous, but you have to change because you do not live up to what we think society should be." I want to discuss the physical standards for women. I am delighted that they have joined, but if I or the Under–Secretary of State for Defence, who is about to make the wind-up speech, were stuck on a battlefield with a bullet wound in the leg, I would want a strong man to pick me up. He would agree, because very few women could do it. It is as simple as that.

I am not going to bang on about homosexuality. There have always been homosexuals in the armed forces, but if soldiers, sailors and airmen who are hot-bedding—perhaps sharing beds in submarines—do not want to share bunks with homosexuals, why must they be forced so to do? In my view, political correctness is undermining the armed forces, and they think so as well. I refer briefly to the European convention on human rights. There will be many court cases about people being told off by their commanding officer. They are already taking place, which is a great pity, and that is but part of what is undermining the ethos of the armed forces.

Hon. Members will be glad to know that I am on my final point as the wind-up speeches are about to start. The armed forces like to be valued and appreciated, which is normal. We all like to be appreciated—we know that as politicians.

Dr. Moonie: I appreciate you, Andrew.

Mr. Robathan: I thank the Minister for his sedentary intervention.

The issues are not only pay, allowances and the attack on the old-fashioned way in which members of the armed forces do things, but the way in which they are perceived by Ministers and their political masters. In October, three of the five Foot Guards battalions were on operations in Northern Ireland. The Irish Guards were still in Kosovo, where they were the first battalion into Pristina. At Christmas, while we were enjoying our turkey with our feet up, two battalions were still running around the streets of Northern Ireland, working on behalf of the Government and the people of this country. Yet the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, whom they were serving directly in a security role, did not thank them. He called them chinless wonders. Now the armed forces know how they are regarded at the dinner parties of the chattering classes in Hampstead and Islington. *[Interruption.]* I hear the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) laugh. Let me tell her that that is what soldiers with whom I served say to me. They are very upset. Perhaps no one should be surprised when members of the armed forces do not wish to remain there.

I note in passing that another chinless wonder has just walked in.

I assure Labour Members that this is what the three of us on this side feel. No one should be surprised when armed forces personnel have a sense of being undervalued and under-appreciated. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to do what the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has not done, and apologise for the fact that a huge number of guardsmen have given their lives, are still serving, or have given a lifetime of service to this country. Guardsmen are still doing that in Northern Ireland, and I hope that the Minister will apologise on behalf of the Secretary of State.

6.31 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The debate has provided us with an invaluable opportunity to examine the whole issue of defence, defence policy and our defence establishment from the point of view of those who serve in the armed forces.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) suggested that we might revert to the system of individual service debates, which could be held in Westminster Hall. I think there might be great merit in that, but it would have been a pity if we had not had this opportunity to consider the question of armed forces personnel as a discrete subject.

Another interesting feature of the debate—to which, unfortunately, we have become used during defence debates—was the extraordinary lack of interest in, let alone commitment to, the subject on the part of Labour Members. The Labour party has a vast majority over all other parties: it has far more than twice as many MPs as my party. However, we have heard three speeches from Labour Back Benchers, two from members of other parties, and six from the Conservative Opposition. That, I think, says it all.

Nevertheless, I want to do justice to the speeches of Labour Members. The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) has served in our forces and speaks with knowledge and experience. He paid a striking tribute to the value of military training, which contrasted with some of the politically correct speeches that we heard from other Labour Members.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), speaking for the Liberal Democrat party, dealt in a statesmanlike manner with the urgent need for decisions to be made on strategic airlift. He mentioned the roll-on roll-off issue, with which I shall deal shortly; not surprisingly, he also mentioned his horror—widely shared by Conservative Members and no doubt also shared, more discreetly, by Labour Members—at the reported remarks of the Secretary of State about metal bashing no longer being a national asset. As the Secretary of State is here, perhaps he will take the opportunity to set the record straight.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman also said—I think every member of the official Opposition will agree—that, if the European security and defence identity is to proceed at all, it must be capability led. Nothing could be more disastrous than an ESDI that did not represent a substantial increase in the actual commitment of the European allies to provide the resources that are necessary for our common defence; indeed, an ESDI on that false basis would be not just useless but extremely dangerous.

The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), speaking as a member of the Defence Committee, seems to have adopted the politically correct agenda. She said that everyone should be subject to the same rules and regulations. I am afraid I must disagree: there is something special about the armed forces. There is something special about service in them, and about the people who are prepared to commit themselves to that service and to risk their lives in consequence. It is important for the armed services to continue to be based on the traditional values of discipline, duty, selflessness, coolness and steadiness under fire. All those values are discounted in our modern, politically correct society. Nothing would be more disastrous than to introduce the politically correct culture into the armed forces.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) made a powerful speech. He stated—it cannot be stated too often, or emphasised too greatly—that good armed forces do not happen by accident. They are the result of years of training, hard work and people going into the armed forces who are prepared to put up with that degree of discipline, sheer personal discomfort and disruption to their lives. There must be worries in some circles as to whether society as it evolves will continue to produce enough people who are prepared to make such a sacrifice. We will all suffer if that is not the case.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) raised a single issue: the overseas allowances that are paid when people are resident in Germany, but then are lost when they serve in former Yugoslavia. A similar point was made about London allowances by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood. I hope that we shall get a response on that from the Minister.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) quite rightly went into procurement issues. He talked about the mess-up of the Tornado refurbishment and conversion programme: the GR1-GR4 programme. It has taken two years and the problems still do not seem to have been sorted out.

[Mr. Quentin Davies]

The hon. Gentleman talked about the SA80. The Labour party loves to say that that problem has been with us for a long time. It certainly has: it does not seem to have resolved it in the past three years. It is about time that the Government did what a Government are supposed to do: take decisive action to resolve the problem in short order or to make alternative arrangements. As I have said at the Dispatch Box before, having an unreliable rifle is a nightmare.

The hon. Gentleman talked about Bowman, which was several years behind schedule when the Labour party came to power. Now it is twice that period behind schedule: it is six, seven or eight years behind schedule. Again, that is not good enough. He talked about the beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile. I thought at one moment that he was making a sales pitch for Raytheon, with which Shorts had a relationship, but I later discovered that his constituent has a bet each way. No doubt, whatever the result of the Government's deliberations, he will be a happy man.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton) reminded us that the real task of the armed forces is to prepare for high-intensity warfare. We know that it is precisely by preparing for that and by having the equipment, men and training available to cope with it, if it comes, that we provide the best possible deterrent and make it least likely that those skills will have to be used. Those must be available, as must the equipment to back them up. Nothing must be done in any way to deplete or erode the high level of training that is needed for high-intensity warfare. We must bear that in mind in peacekeeping operations and in other uses of our armed forces personnel, as my right hon. Friend said. He made it clear that it would be a great mistake to cut the budget any further.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) talked about the recruitment of women. Apparently, he wants quotas for women. Conservative Members do not believe in quotas in any context. That seems a particularly ill-considered suggestion.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) talked about the importance of getting ESDI right. He is right about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) congratulated the Government, which shows that Conservative Members are open-minded, generous and prepared to give credit where it is due. We regret just that there are so few occasions when it is due. He congratulated the Government on their families taskforce. I am happy to endorse that congratulation.

My hon. Friend made it clear that we cannot expect the United States to go on making an utterly disproportionate contribution to the security of the world, including in our time zone. Based on his considerable knowledge of reserve forces throughout the world, he revealed some interesting facts about the United States having not just 10 regular divisions, but 13 national guard divisions, which can be mobilised to support them. My hon. Friend also talked about the way in which our Territorial Army has been run down not merely quantitatively, but qualitatively, and the fact that the so-called 15 remaining infantry battalions are not battalions at all—they are probably not effective even as companies. It is a disgraceful state of affairs. He also mentioned how important it is to have not only shop-window, high-profile equipment, but necessary back-up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood said that the quality of our armed forces is quite exceptional. He also said, however, that the quantity is quite inadequate, and he is right about that. He also made 10 interesting suggestions that I, for one, will certainly be thinking about very carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) made an eloquent appeal for St. Dunstan's and gave a moving account of the Channel Dash operation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) rightly pointed out how revolting it is that we have Ministers who, when they are on their best behaviour, say how good and splendid our armed forces are and how much they are to be admired, but who, when they let down their guard, make thoroughly revolting remarks.

Mr. Brazier: They should apologise.

Mr. Davies: Yes, they should.

In the past two months, since I started the job of Opposition Defence spokesman, it has become clear to me that the strategic defence review is in many respects very inadequate. It is certainly vapid and vague in many spheres, and it certainly does not emphasise sufficiently home defence. One might also perhaps have liked to have more frigates. The proposals on the TA were certainly a great mistake.

Parts of the SDR, however, are fine as a business plan. It would be fine if the Government had the slightest intention of implementing them. As we proceed, however, we realise that the SDR is another example of clever, new Labour smoke and mirrors. It is spin-doctoring, but it is not intended to be reality.

The important procurement decisions have still not been taken, and the Government have been proceeding to run down our defence effort by continually cutting the defence budget. As I have said before, one cannot be serious about defence and plan annually—year in, year out—to take 2 or 3 per cent. in real terms from the defence budget. One cannot do that and be serious about defence.

Ministers who call themselves Defence Ministers have now abdicated completely responsibility to the Treasury. We have an extraordinary situation in which the Treasury is getting involved in absolutely everything. The Treasury is taking over procurement decisions, meeting with Raytheon and Boeing on the beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile system and strategic airlift. The Treasury is taking those decisions.

One thing that we had better find out today is whether the Treasury is taking the key decision on roll/on-roll off/ ferries. If the Treasury is not taking the decision, who is? I tabled a written parliamentary question on the issue about 10 days ago, but I have not yet received a reply.

When the Government decided on a private finance initiative structure for that procurement, did they realise that the effect would be to remove from the project the protection on defence procurement offered under the treaty, thereby making it impossible for the Government to give the order to British yards if a lower-cost bid came in from elsewhere? Or did the Treasury know perfectly

well that that would be the consequence, and therefore establish a PFI project in the hope that it could deny all responsibility?

Our yards are entitled to believe that they will receive some preference in placing the order. It is quite certain that there is not a cat in hell's chance that our yards could bid successfully for military vessels for any other major industrialised European Union country, certainly not for France or Germany. The Government have established an unlevel playing field. Did they do it by incompetence and inadvertence, or did they do it deliberately, thinking that they would have an excuse for an utterly unforgivable situation?

Of course, one could argue for obtaining the benefits of competition within the European Union, but one certainly could not make a coherent or respectable argument for unilateral disarmament—for saying that other shipyards can bid for our orders, but our shipyards cannot bid for anyone else's orders; at least, one could not do that unless one had complete contempt for Britain's manufacturing base and believed that metal bashing was no longer a national asset. We had better have an answer to that this evening, as there is great concern throughout the country from an industrial and defence point of view.

The defence of the country is no longer in the hands of people who care about defence; it is in the hands of the new Labour Treasury. There can be no less safe hands for the defence of this country than that.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I congratulate my hon. Friends on speaking to the theme of the debate today. Most of what I listened to from Opposition Members was at best tangential, but one can forgive them that as clearly they have nothing worth saying on the subject of personnel. *[Interruption.]* I will carry on saying that until they do.

We have heard, during today's debate, how our armed forces are able to act as a force for good in the world from Northern Ireland to Kosovo to the Gulf. They work to alleviate suffering, build trust and prevent conflict. Our ability to do all those things depends, above all, on one factor—the quality of our people. I intend to concentrate most of my remarks on aspects of our services for our people, which give rise to justifiable concern. If there is any time left, I shall attempt to answer points raised during the debate. I will not have time to take interventions. *[Interruption.]* If people want me to take interventions, they should make shorter speeches.

I am pleased to say that the quality of our people is immensely high. We ask a lot of them, and they never let us down. However, this is a two-way street. In return for their professionalism, loyalty and courage, we must look after them and their families. The policy for people—a key part of the strategic defence review—is delivering that. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces has described the programme of change that we have introduced through initiatives such as the service families taskforce, the learning forces initiative and the overarching personnel strategy.

I make no apology for saying that the watchword of this Government is modernisation, and the armed forces are central to this process. Hence, our policy for people remains our highest priority short of actual operations, because without the right people we cannot achieve all of the other things that are necessary to modernise Britain's defence.

I wish to refer to some of my areas of responsibility. First, I wish to refer to the defence medical services. As a doctor, I am delighted that that is one of my ministerial responsibilities. First, I pay tribute to the excellent support that they provide to our armed forces, both at home and overseas—particularly in the deployments in Bosnia and Kosovo. They provide first-class medical care to British forces. It is a further testament to their skill and professionalism that they also provide medical care to local civilian populations on a wide range of humanitarian operations, particularly in the Balkans.

The House will be well aware of the problems besetting the defence medical services—problems which this Government inherited. A succession of reviews—culminating in the now notorious defence costs study 15 in 1994—left the defence medical services with low morale and too few people. It is a bitter irony that, by 1997, the defence medical services themselves were haemorrhaging.

The defence medical services were chronically underfunded and, worse, were losing people at a rate that threatened our armed forces' capability to meet their operational commitments. One of the Government's highest priorities has been to reverse the shortages in defence medical manpower and equipment. The changes we are making as a result of the strategic defence review and our new strategy for the defence medical services are hard evidence of our commitments to medical care.

Mr. Robathan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I always understood that a wind-up speech was meant to encapsulate the debate, and was not a scripted speech to be read out.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Ministers must wind up the debate as they see fit.

Dr. Moonie: A wee bit of remedial education on the other side would not come amiss.

Mr. Robathan: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Moonie: Having listened to five minutes of drivel from the hon. Gentleman, I do not think that he has any right to speak now.

Mr. Robathan: Will the Minister not take an intervention?

Dr. Moonie: No. Sit down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is for the Chair to decide when hon. Members should resume their seats. Perhaps we could carry on in a slightly calmer atmosphere. This is a very important debate.

Dr. Moonie: I have noticed no loss of calm in myself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but a certain lack of self-control on the other side, perhaps.

We have already provided an additional £140 million for medical manpower and equipment. That extra funding covers the four years to April 2002. More money will be

[Dr. Moonie]

made available after that. Let there be no doubt that, as in every other area of defence, people are at the very heart of the defence medical services. Making good the current shortfalls of medical personnel is the single greatest problem facing them.

I am pleased to say that there is now some evidence that the high rate of people leaving the defence medical services is levelling out, and that the manning situation is stabilising. Recruitment into training is generally satisfactory, but it takes several years to train medical personnel and, in the case of surgeons, a minimum of eight years. If we are to see any significant improvement in the short to medium term, we need to recruit directly fully or partially trained personnel. That has proved difficult in the past and work has been put in hand to identify the obstacles to direct entry recruitment.

I know that defence accommodation is a matter of great concern among hon. Members. It is a matter for which I have responsibility, and one that greatly affects morale among both single and married service men and women. Our armed forces are as good as any in the world, and better in most cases. We ask a lot of them, and they have a right to expect the best in return, in terms not only of training, equipment and firepower, but of the way in which they are looked after as people.

We are committed to caring for our people and their families across the spectrum of their needs. We have set in hand an extensive programme of improvements to existing accommodation, together with the construction of new-build housing at a number of defence establishments. I hope that our approach of—to use the usual phrase—joined-up government has shown that, working with local authorities, other Departments and the private sector, we can provide the best accommodation for our people.

We have a good working relationship with Annington Homes, which has bought most of the service families quarters, and we have plans for public-private partnership arrangements to provide new housing. The programme of releasing property to Annington Homes has been a great success, and we are running ahead of the numbers envisaged at the time of sale, so far having released a total of 3,100 properties, with a further 3,000 releases planned for this year.

When accommodation is too old to be repaired, we have plans for new build. Private finance initiative contracts have been placed to provide new properties at RAF Lossiemouth, Cosford and Shawbury, at RNAS Yeovilton and in central Scotland. Two further contracts are currently being negotiated to build new properties in Bristol, Bath, Portsmouth, Shrivenham and Wattisham.

We are also making improvements to the accommodation available to our single service men and women. We appreciate how important the standard of accommodation is, and we are committed to giving them what they deserve. In 1998, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces directed that a steering group be set up at a very senior level in the Ministry of Defence to establish a co-ordinated approach to managing the single living accommodation across the three services. That was as a direct result of the strategic defence review and, again, I believe that our approach has shown that we can bring real success in the short term.

For example, the Royal Navy has invested a total of more than £10 million in flats at HMS Dryad and Bickleigh barracks, the Army has just finished improving Robertson barracks at Swanton Morley in Norfolk and there are a further 10 programmes to improve the standard of Army single living accommodation across the UK, ranging from Southampton to Catterick.

We are well aware of some of the problems with the existing accommodation at Aldershot, and a programme of improvement has started there. I know that the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) would have liked to be here but had to leave.

On the subject of overstretch, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces mentioned the many improvements that we have made to the terms and conditions under which service men and women have to exist, and we remain firmly committed to tackling overstretch in the armed forces.

I was asked a specific question on the statistics for the three services, and it is true that we tend to use the Army as the reference point. It is difficult to give the figures, because all three services use different methods for calculating what they consider to be overstretch and what they consider to be the active deployment of personnel. They have different environments, structures and operational postures, so it is hardly surprising that they are different, but that means that it is difficult to make direct comparisons of relative overstretch levels.

The Navy include all seagoing personnel in their figures, the Army includes those deploying, deployed and recovering from operational duties, and the RAF provides statistics only for those physically deployed away from base. That explains why the RAF gives a comparatively low figure of 3.4 per cent. of trained strength on deployment. The Navy often has up to 40 per cent. of its serving personnel on active duty—in other words, at sea—and the Army has managed to reduce its figure to 27 per cent. from its previously much higher levels.

The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) mentioned fast-jet pilots. Although we are short of pilots, we are unable to put in the air only nine aircraft, so the situation is not as bad as it sounds.

Mr. Key: It is bad enough.

Dr. Moonie: The hon. Gentleman should not get me wrong. We do not take overstretch lightly, and that is why my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces spent so much time on it earlier and why I am trying to address it further now. It is important as one of the major factors affecting operational effectiveness and morale. A wide range of measures are in hand to correct the problem, especially in the RAF, including more recruitment, putting more entrants into cockpits more quickly, and retaining service personnel through the link-up scheme. That will fund RAF pilots to gain commercial pilot licences in return for a guaranteed period of service and phased release for employment in commercial airline companies. Innovative approaches such as that should pay off in the medium term.

Retention is another area of major concern and we are tackling it as a high priority. In addition to all the policy for people initiatives that we have introduced, we have tried to concentrate on areas such as better terms and conditions of service, improvements in pay and

allowances, better quality of training and opportunities to gain civilian qualifications. In the Navy, we are making specific attempts to improve single living accommodation, to provide additional longer service at sea bonus payments for excessive preparation, which were introduced in December. We are trialling satellite television to try to improve the quality of time spent at sea, and we are fitting e-mail and internet facilities. The link-up scheme will also include Sea Harrier pilots.

In the Army, officer and soldier premature voluntary retirement rates seem to have stabilised at lower rates this year, and while we are still concerned about junior officers the overall position is not as bad as Opposition Members might have feared. We are keeping the situation under constant review. We are also trying to improve living accommodation. I visited some single living accommodation yesterday, which was not the worst by any means, but I am well aware of the problems with which single soldiers have to contend. I assure the House that I shall deal with them as quickly as possible. We are trying to reduce turbulence for personnel and their families in the Army, and I intend to give further direction on that point to the Defence Housing Executive and through the chain of command—

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

PETITION

Allotments, Prestonville

7 pm

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): I am pleased to present a petition from Prestonville Community Association in my constituency, which is signed by 1,128 residents and concerns land for which the association has planning permission for allotments and a wildlife site, but on which the owners, Rail Property Limited, are seeking permission to build flats.

The petition

Declares that allotment land and wildlife areas in urban environments, such as the allotment land adjacent to 55 Highcroft Villas, Brighton should be preserved, protected and enhanced for the benefit of local people.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to do all in his power to prevent building developments from taking place on allotment land in general and specifically on the land at Highcroft Villas Brighton.

To lie upon the Table.

Burials and Cremations

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

7.1 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I am delighted to have been granted this debate, especially as the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), will reply. I understand that he has cancelled an overseas visit to reply—or so one of his ministerial colleagues told me.

The matter is serious. Some people may feel that the debate should have taken place in January when we had major problems with funeral delays, but I have waited nine weeks to get it. It would have been more relevant then, but I want to try to ensure that we never again have the problems that we experienced this January.

I ask my right hon. Friend to cast his mind back to January, when we had a flu epidemic. We saw vivid pictures on television—hospital morgues were full and refrigerated vehicles had to be put in hospital car parks to store the bodies because they could not be buried directly and on time.

At the time, the view was that it was a national health service problem. The reality is that the NHS was left with the problem and the cause lies elsewhere. During this debate, I shall discuss what went wrong and how, perhaps, this Parliament and the Government can help to put it right.

There is no doubt that the way in which we dealt with the problem varied during the flu outbreak in January. In some parts of Essex, for example, bereaved relatives had to wait more than two weeks to bury their loved ones. In one area, cremations were delayed by more than a month, although the customary wait was four or five days.

That sort of delay has awful consequences. In one family, an elderly lady died and her daughter flew in from America to be told that the burial could not take place for two weeks. She returned to the United States, but shortly afterwards her father died. She flew back to this country and was told that the burial could not take place for nearly a month. Again, she had to return home to America and miss the funeral. On top of the sadness of bereavement, people had the trauma of being unable to attend the funeral.

In this country, a funeral is a great tradition. It is a watershed in the grieving process. After the funeral we continue to grieve, but we try to put our lives back together. That is not possible if one has to wait a month for the funeral. In many areas, one finishes work when a close family member dies and one does not return until after the funeral. That cannot happen if the funeral takes place a month after the death. People are left in emotional limbo.

I am not raising this matter because I have a problem in my constituency—quite the reverse. Carlisle has an excellent burial and bereavement service. I pay special tribute to Mr. Ken West, the bereavement service manager of the city council, and his staff for the dedicated way in which they not only ensure that the services are efficient, but work towards improving them and making sure that the bereaved are consulted as well as comforted. The standard in Carlisle is very high—only this week it received national recognition. I congratulate the staff and Mr. Ken West.

[Mr. Eric Martlew]

It is not as though the fact that there are more deaths in the winter than in the summer is any surprise. I have statistics on mortality from the House of Commons Library from 1841 to 1997—more than 150 years. The common factor is that during the winter months, between January and March, there is a 20, 25 or 30 per cent. increase in the number of deaths in this country compared with the summer quarter. We have always known that, but now we have statistics going back 150 years showing it to be the case. So why are we so ill prepared?

I would like to discuss what I believe to be the main reasons for delays in funeral services and for the differing standards throughout the country. The main cause for concern is that there is no industry standard for bereavement services or funeral delays. For example, this winter there were delays of up to four weeks in Romford. I understand that in Shrewsbury, in the winter, it is not unusual to have delays in excess of two weeks. In Carlisle, the maximum delay was eight days. That was during the flu epidemic; it was nothing to do with any problems with the burial service, but with the fact that the funeral directors could not cope.

There are variations. There are no Government targets. This is a very sensitive issue, and I believe that people expect the Government to set a standard. I hope that their best value policy will change the situation. That is assuming that the Audit Commission sees waiting times as a performance indicator which should be met by all local authorities.

At present, there is only one industry standard. The voluntary charter of bereavement was written by Mr. Ken West, the Carlisle bereavement manager, in 1997 for the Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration. It is a very interesting document, which gives performance targets. It says that charter members should specify maximum funeral waiting times and develop strategies for handling high death rates. Not only do charter members have a target, they know how to cope with the winter problems. Unfortunately, this is a voluntary code. There are only 30 or so charter members, which leaves more than 200 local authorities without a common standard, or any standard at all.

I come now to other factors. I do not think that people should be expected to work on bank holidays at Christmas and the new year, but that means a backlog of funerals in January. I see no reason why Christmas eve, for example, could not be a normal day for funerals, or why the hours during which funerals are held could not be extended in the period between Christmas and new year.

Finance is not the problem. Crematoriums are public facilities, but they are often very profitable. However, local authorities seem more keen on taking the money than on paying for extended days, more staff or overtime. That matter needs to be looked at seriously. Problems also arise with death certificates, post mortems and cremation certificates. Funeral directors cannot arrange a funeral until a death certificate or cremation certificate has been issued. Delays are often caused when doctors do not sign those certificates. The cremation certificate is not provided by the national health service. In fact, it costs £70 to get that certificate signed. It is up to the British Medical Association to ensure that there is adequate cover on hand to prevent delays in signing.

Facilities also need to be considered. Sometimes the people performing a cremation are very inefficient. In crematoriums with two chapels, both could be used at the same time. However, pressure of numbers sometimes causes cremators to reduce the length of funeral services. That cannot be right. People are entitled to a dignified funeral, and it is wrong to squeeze a service into 20 minutes because of pressure of numbers. We should look to increase the number of chapels available for such services.

The big problem is one of inflexibility. We have been doing things in certain ways for years. Local authorities do not really pay attention to cremations and funerals—I doubt that many councillors get telephoned with complaints about delays in funerals. People ring them because their bins have not been emptied, but not about funerals. Local authorities should think about that problem.

The private sector has moved in and built various facilities. In Bristol, for example, the waiting time for funerals has been reduced. However, local authorities still fear that that will cost them money. Planning obstructions seem to be put in the way of the construction of private facilities, so they cannot set up in competition with the public facilities and local authorities do not lose the income from funerals and cremations.

The National Association of Funeral Directors wrote to me on this matter giving reasons for the delays that have been suffered. First, it said that the extended Christmas holiday period—when there were an extra three or four days off—led to delays of up to four weeks. I accept that delays were caused, but they were not of four weeks. Secondly, the association said that doctors were not available to sign death certificates and that there was a backlog in the coroner's court. That deserves attention. Thirdly, it mentioned the increased incidence of deaths caused by the flu epidemic, and I accept that that happened. Finally, it said that the flu virus took a toll among people working in the cemeteries, and that problems arose when they took time off for illness. However, the association noted that crematoriums did not extend their hours of operation to allow more time for funerals to take place. The association's chief executive officer, Mr. Alan Slater, said that the delays were not the responsibility of the association, and I have to accept that.

In the past, there has been a cosy relationship between the association's members and local authorities. Everyone likes an easy day, working from 9 am to 4 pm, Monday to Friday, but the association's members know that their business will not disappear. They hold the monopoly in the market and, in their view, a funeral that is delayed can be slotted in later. I think that, in the main, local authorities were at fault for funeral delays this winter.

It would seem that the National Association of Funeral Directors has a problem with charging. Charges have increased for funerals throughout the country by about 25 per cent. in the past two years. It has been suggested that that is because major companies are moving in, taking over the old, traditional family businesses, exploiting the situation and increasing prices. I do not want to go into that today, but it may be something for the Competition Commission to examine in future.

Instead, I shall suggest where the Government fit into the issue. They seem not to have a role or to take a role. My right hon. Friend is a Home Office Minister who deals, of course, with Home Office legislation. There are,

of course, Ministers who deal with the health aspects, the consumer problems and the social fund implications of funerals. We need to have a Government who are more proactive in this area who will set high standards for the service throughout the country. I would welcome an in-depth assessment of the industry by the Audit Commission and the setting of national benchmarks by which all authorities could be judged.

The voluntary charter for bereavement could form the basis of a policy that would be developed to ensure that no matter where someone lives, or more importantly where he dies, there will be a quality of service of which that person and the bereaved can be assured. Best practice would thereby be assured.

I hope that the Government will consider these matters. They have been told that there is a problem, and I look forward to my right hon. Friend's response. Perhaps I might meet him soon, or one of his colleagues, to consider how we might make progress. We cannot allow the same problem to confront us next year. If that happens, the House and the Government must bear some of the responsibility.

7.18 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) has raised an important concern, whose importance is not reflected in any way by the attendance in the Chamber. The issue goes to the welfare and concerns of the bereaved, who are at their most vulnerable when the funeral of a loved one is delayed. That can have a particularly damaging impact on their capacity to come to terms with their great and tragic loss.

As my hon. Friend said in a careful and thoughtful contribution, this is a complex matter—because of the number of Government Departments involved and because of the various stages and constituent parts that go to ensuring that a bereaved family can secure the burial or cremation of their loved one with due expedition.

I have listened keenly to my hon. Friend. We take seriously the issue of delay, and it is important to consider it in its wider perspective. Of course, as my hon. Friend will realise, many burials and cremations take place each year, and a comparatively small number of them are subject to delay. In fact, relatively few complaints are made; last year, the Home Office received one about a delay. Nevertheless, one complaint is one too many, and we accept that there are wider concerns. My hon. Friend has provided examples of such concerns, and each one of them is important and significant to the bereaved families involved. I am pleased that he has been able to raise this matter, because those families deserve assurances that the House pays careful attention to it and that the Government do all that they can to address the problems that arise.

Mr. Martlew: The fact that the Home Office has received only one complaint, when in January there were delays of more than four weeks, suggests not that the issue affects only a few people, but that people do not think that the Government have an input. Many people were affected this winter.

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. It is true that we must be cautious before we draw conclusions from the number of complaints that central Government Departments receive. Members of the public may be correct in their perception that there is only a limited amount that the Government can do to deal with the problem, bearing in mind the number of agencies, organisations and authorities that have an input in determining whether there is a delay in any particular case. Nevertheless, all that can be done by Government given those limitations should be done, and we are determined to ensure that it is.

I shall refer to the history of this issue, which goes back to the origins of local government's and local communities' responsibility for funerals. Funeral services have always been provided by and on behalf of the local community. Until the beginning of the 19th century, responsibility for record keeping and provision of burial grounds lay with the Church. Now, once deaths have been registered by local registrars, funerals are organised by local funeral directors, using local municipal or private cremation and burial facilities. Local arrangements can understandably be far more responsive to the community's circumstances and needs.

It is perfectly true that no national standards have been set for the timeliness of funerals. Equally, there have never been national standards for the provision of burial or cremation facilities. Municipal authorities are empowered to provide cemeteries and crematoriums if they judge that it is appropriate to do so, but private undertakings will make their own assessment of the demands and the commercial risks. We have no evidence that, in the main, the arrangements work anything other than relatively well.

Charters are clearly significant. The Government, through their service first programme, have promoted the adoption of charters by all public services. Burial, cremation and other authorities are no exception. It is a matter for the relevant authorities to decide how to proceed with the work and what standards of service they can offer. They need to have regard, among other things, to the resources available to them.

The Government have not sought to set national standards for the burial and cremation industry pending their consideration of the standards promoted in two documents which have appeared in recent years: the charter for the bereaved, which was produced by the Institute for Burial and Cremation Administration, and the dead citizens charter which was produced by the National Funerals College. Neither document sets explicit standards for timeliness, although the National Funerals College encourages extended opening times for burial and cremation facilities. The college and the institute may want further to consider with their members whether such explicit standards should be set.

Nevertheless, seven local authority bereavement services in England and Wales achieved charter mark awards for the quality of their services in recent years; it is to be hoped that more such organisations will gain that standard. It is important that local bereavement services provide the most responsive service that they can to local people. It was interesting and encouraging to hear of my hon. Friend's experience in Carlisle on that matter.

On coroners and post mortems, it is important to realise that, sometimes, delays will be occasioned by the need for medico-legal investigation before the funeral can take place. Coroners are well aware of the effect of such delays, and of the importance that the Government attach

[Mr. Boateng]

to the timely dispatch of business. Whenever possible, coroners try to release the bodies to the relatives as soon as possible after the conclusion of any necessary post mortem examination.

The model charter for the coroner service, launched last September, sets a target for the release of the body in most cases. Through that initiative, we are doing all that we can to encourage and support coroners to meet the highest standards. We are currently monitoring their progress on that matter and on the new procedures, introduced last year, to reduce delays when bodies are held pending serious criminal investigation. However, there is no room for complacency. We are not complacent about what needs to be done.

During the recent millennium period, we asked coroners about their arrangements. We suggested that they satisfy themselves that appropriate support services—from registrars, funeral directors and crematoriums and cemeteries—were in place. In the main, they achieved a relatively satisfactory standard.

However, lessons have been learned from their experience. We shall ensure that we build on that in the slightly different circumstances of the long holidays at Christmas and the new year in future. We are keen to explore ways of improving weekend and holiday provision of bereavement services. The Department of Health is currently examining the incidence of problems with a view to issuing appropriate guidance in due course.

My hon. Friend referred to the need for Government co-ordination. There is no one Minister or Department with responsibility for bereavement services in the widest sense. Bearing in mind the wide range of services needed when a death occurs and during the weeks and months that follow, we need to ensure that, as far as is possible and appropriate, those services work in a way that is responsive to the Government's modernising initiative.

That initiative is committed to promoting improvements to public services in local government and in central Government. We have been examining the services required at a number of key stages in life, and how they can be made more accessible and intelligible to the public. That is part of the work of the bereavement service action team, which works with other organisations to find ways of improving the services provided for the bereaved.

As a result of the tragic incidents surrounding the murders committed by Dr. Harold Shipman, we have set up a review of death certification. That should assist in such matters.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising these important issues. I hope that he will not hesitate to send me details of cases on which he has specific concerns, so that they can be addressed. We must ensure that, as far as possible, wherever burial and cremation services are offered they meet the reasonable demands of the bereaved, and ease, rather than aggravate, their grief. By raising the matter tonight, my hon. Friend has undoubtedly assisted in that process; the House is grateful to him.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 14 April 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Medical Treatment (Prevention of Euthanasia) Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 10

CONSENT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC PROSECUTIONS

'No prosecution under this Act shall be brought without the prior consent of the Director of Public Prosecution.'.—*[Mr. Dismore.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

9.33 am

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 11—*The Attorney General's consent (No. 2)*—

'.—No prosecution shall be instituted under the Act without the consent of the Attorney General.'.

New clause 13—*Liability*—

'.—This Act shall give rise to liability in tort only.'.

New clause 15—*Trials*—

'.—Any trial under this Act shall be only on indictment in the Crown Court.'.

New clause 17—*Restriction on publicity for proceedings*—

'.—(1) No person shall publish any material which is intended or likely to identify—

(a) any patient in respect of whom proceedings are brought under this Act;

(b) any defendant or witness in proceedings under this Act

until the conclusion of those proceedings and then with the consent of the Court.

(2) In any proceedings for an offence under this section it is a defence for the accused to prove that he did not know, and had no reason to suspect, that the published material was intended or likely to identify the person concerned.

(3) In this section "publish" includes broadcast by radio, television or cable television and cause to be published and "material" includes any picture or representation.

(4) A person who contravenes this section is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 4 on the standard scale.'.

Mr. Dismore: I have tabled the new clause dealing with consent to prosecution not out of deviousness but because it is an issue in which I have been interested for some time. In fact, I first raised it in a written question that the Solicitor-General answered on 22 November last year, in which I asked whether he intended to respond to the Law Commission report on the subject. I was pleased by the answer, in which the Government indicated that they were looking closely at the Law Commission's recommendations, which I shall examine in more detail shortly. The answer stated:

> The Government recognise that the current consent requirements are in need of reform and agrees with the Law Commission's view that a consent provision must attach to a particular offence not to a particular defendant or class of defendants.—[*Official Report*, 22 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 23W.]

When preparing for the debate, I refamiliarised myself with the Law Commission's report, "Consents to Prosecution", No. 255, printed on 19 October 1998. I was fascinated to see that the Law Commission specifically addressed the subject of the Bill. The section dealing with the problem of medical manslaughter starts at paragraph 5.36, on page 44. The commission states:

> We considered whether a consent requirement would be justified not merely in respect of certain offences but also in respect of other offences when they are allegedly committed by certain defendants—the reason being that such defendants if innocent, would suffer particularly serious harm in the event of a private prosecution. The only such case that we have been asked to consider is the question of the prosecution of doctors for manslaughter.

That goes to the heart of the Bill. At paragraph 5.38, the Law Commission states:

> The starting point must be to bear in mind the strength of feeling understandably and inevitably caused by fatal accidents, and we appreciate the intense pressure that can be brought to bear by relatives of the deceased in seeking a prosecution. An acute illustration of this is said to arise when a person dies in hospital or where the relatives of the deceased believe that the person died as the result of some professional act or omission of the doctors. As we pointed out in the consultation paper, it had been suggested to us that criminal prosecutions, even if subsequently dropped before proceedings have concluded, would be likely to cause irreparable damage to the reputation of a doctor with the result that his or her career would be placed in serious jeopardy. On the assumption that this was correct, this raised the issue of whether, in those circumstances, consent should be required before doctors could be prosecuted for manslaughter.

The Law Commission carried out a thorough consultation on that proposal. It reported certain comments, which are instrumental in informing our debate. The report states:

> a few respondents thought the introduction of such protection, explicitly nor implicitly, should be limited to a specified class of persons predominantly those in the medical profession. The Recorder of Bristol thought the category should be restricted to professionals who were forced to make life and death decisions in the operating theatre, while Longmore J—

that is, Mr. Justice Longmore—

> gave as examples doctors, nurses and possibly other paramedical staff but pointed out the class should be fairly narrowly defined.

The issue of paramedical staff is important in connection with the subject of the third group of amendments. The report continues:

> The Medical Defence Union asked for consideration to be given to other health-care workers whose position was similar to doctors and who could only work effectively in a climate of trust and confidence.

However, the Law Commission was not convinced by that argument. It concurred with and adopted an argument that was put to it, that no class of persons—in this case,

[Mr. Dismore]

doctors—deserved more protection than another in connection with prosecution for generic offences such as murder or manslaughter. The commission's conclusion was:

> we conclude that it would not be appropriate to depart from the fundamental principle so as to require consent for prosecutions of doctors for manslaughter—

citing

> the absence of any evidence that the working lives of doctors . . . have been substantially damaged

so far by observance of that principle. It compared such cases to that of a bank manager accused of theft, or a schoolteacher accused of a sex offence. Therefore, on the face of it, it might appear that the Law Commission has adopted a position that is contrary to the one that I am advocating in my new clause. However, there is a real distinction to be drawn between the Law Commission's comments on the prosecution of doctors for manslaughter and the provisions of the Bill.

First, we must consider the subject of the Bill. On Second Reading, the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) said that the Bill was designed to

> pursue one simple objective: to restore the integrity of the fundamental principle of the law of murder. That is exactly what it does.

The hon. Lady said that the focus of the Bill was

> to try to restore the integrity of the fundamental principle of the law of murder and to make doctors responsible in law for their purposes in deciding on treatment of their patients.—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 689-691.]

I believe that there is a distinction between murder, which carries the certainty of a life sentence if the person is convicted of that offence, and manslaughter, where the range of penalties is much less severe. We shall examine that in the second group of new clauses.

There is a second distinction to be drawn. The Law Commission referred to a class of individuals who would be singled out and treated separately, as opposed to the offence itself.

The Bill creates a new offence. The new clause will apply to the requirement for the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions to the new offence. It is therefore in line with the Law Commission's proposal.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): My hon. Friend will be aware that the Tony Bland case is highly relevant. Even after nine Law Lords had given permission for Tony Bland's life support machine to be switched off, Father James Morrow, a Roman Catholic priest who was strongly pro-life, went to court and took out a charge of murder against the doctor, the hospital administration and parents who gave their consent for, in his words,

> the boy to be starved.

He failed in his attempt to persuade the police to take action against those who he claimed were responsible for Tony's death, and the case was thrown out of court. However, my hon. Friend is highlighting a real danger that could arise if the Bill is passed. That case is an exact example.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for citing that interesting example. There are others, which we may need to consider when we deal with the second group of new clauses.

My proposal with regard to the DPP can be compared with the provisions of the Suicide Act 1961. Much of the debate on the Bill has focused on the issue of assisted suicide. Section 2 of that Act deals with

> a person who aids, abets, counsels or procures the suicide of another.

One must assume that doctors who became involved in assisted suicide would fall foul of the existing criminal law. There has been debate on the matter, and I would say in summary that the existing criminal law probably covers it.

Section 2(4) of the 1961 Act states that

> no proceedings shall be instituted for an offence under this section except by or with the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

There are several parallels between that and the issues that we are discussing. For that reason, I believe that my suggestion that the consent of the DPP should be required is fair and appropriate.

What would be the alternative to provision for consent? The Law Commission considered the justification for requiring consent to prosecutions, and at paragraph 3.29 quoted the BBC's legal correspondent for news and current affairs, Mr. Joshua Rozenberg, who said

> that the aim of consent provisions was "to stop busybodies blundering in and prosecuting people in circumstances which would not be seen as appropriate".

That language is rather strong and perhaps underestimates the powerfully held beliefs of those who are promoting and sponsoring the Bill, and who may want to institute prosecutions, should the Bill become law.

9.45 am

The matter is probably better dealt with elsewhere in the report, where the then Attorney-General is quoted in respect of the passing of previous legislation from which a similar issue arose. He said in 1959 that the purpose of consent was "to prevent vexatious proceedings", which is a more neutral way of putting it, and

> to restrict prosecutions in circumstances where a law has, necessarily, been drafted in broad terms, thereby creating the risk that it would catch those who had not offended against the spirit of the legislation.

Many concerns have been expressed about the Bill, which the hon. Member for Congleton tried to assuage on Second Reading and in Committee, when she said that certain circumstances would not be caught by the Bill. However, my reading of the Bill may differ from hers, and the position may well be different if the matter is dealt with in the Crown court. Clause 1 is rather broadly drawn and could fall within that definition given by the Attorney General.

In its evidence to the Franks committee in 1972, the Home Office gave three good reasons why consent was required for prosecutions. The first was to secure consistency of practice in bringing prosecutions, so that different practices were not adopted in different parts of the country. For example, in some parts of the country, there might be particularly strong feeling about the matter covered by the Bill. The Conservatives talk about the relationship between NHS treatment and patients' postcode. It should not be possible for the postcode to be a factor determining whether or not a doctor is prosecuted.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My hon. Friend knows that I have done a great deal of work on road traffic deaths. One of the relevant issues that has given rise to concern is the matter of treating the scene of death as the scene of the crime. If my hon. Friend pursues the logic of his argument as a lawyer—which I am not—would a consequence of clause 1 be that the place of death would be treated as a scene of crime and investigated as such?

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. That is inevitable, and could have consequences for the NHS if a ward or operating theatre had to be blocked off for forensic examination. That could entail the facility being taken out of use for several days while the police conducted their scene-of-crime inquiries. My hon. Friend makes a valid and important point.

The Home Office also told the Franks committee that the purpose of requiring consent was to prevent abuse or the bringing of the law into disrepute, for example with the kind of offence that might otherwise result in vexatious private prosecutions or the institution of proceedings in trivial cases. The Home Office argued, too, that requiring consent would provide some central control over the use of the criminal law when it has to intrude into areas that are particularly sensitive or controversial. Whatever the hon. Lady may think, the Bill is controversial, whether one is for or against it.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): The Bill was fully discussed in Committee, and many of the complicated points that the hon. Gentleman is bringing up could have been raised at that stage. His speech will give rise to the suspicion that he is engaged in an attempt to wreck the Bill by talking it out today.

Mr. Dismore: I refute that allegation entirely. There are five new clauses in the first group, and all are detailed. When the hon. Gentleman hears how my argument develops, he will understand that consent to prosecution is an extremely important point, for the reasons that I am starting to outline. The vague wording of the Bill, the need to ensure consistency and—*[Interruption.]* If the promoter of the Bill is prepared to accept my new clause, I will not have to continue to explain why I think it is an important proposal. If she is not prepared to accept it, I have a job to do to convince her and the House. If the new clause is not accepted, I shall press the motion to a Division.

Mr. Ashton: My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) know that the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) chose the members of the Committee, as is always the case for a private Member's Bill. There were two members who were against the Bill—the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) and me. We had three sittings. It would have been impossible for two against 11 to analyse every point and every amendment—I am not a lawyer; the hon. Member for Isle of Wight is a doctor, but I am not. We also had a Second Reading debate. Although the Bill does not cover Scotland, the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman has made his point. We do not wish to revert to the Committee stage. We must consider the new clause.

Mr. Ashton: The point is, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has made his point. We must now consider the new clause.

Mr. Dismore: The Law Commission concluded that it was right to have restrictions on private prosecutions because of the harm that could result from an unsuccessful prosecution of an innocent defendant and from a successful prosecution that was not in the public interest. Since the consultation took place, the Law Commission presented in its summary of recommendations a series of circumstances in which consent should be required.

First, consent should be required when a defendant is reasonably sure that a prosecution would violate his or her rights under the European convention on human rights. The convention has been incorporated into United Kingdom law through the Human Rights Act 1998, which will take effect in the autumn. The new clause that I tabled on the applicability of the Human Rights Act was not selected for debate. I shall not therefore embark on an exposition of whether a defendant or those seeking a prosecution should be able to rely on the right to life that article 1 establishes. I have some anxieties about article 6, which I shall perhaps tackle later when we consider trial arrangements. It would clearly be open to a professional person who wanted to rely on convention rights to claim that the convention was applicable.

I shall not deal with the second category because I do not believe that it is relevant. The third category covers offences that create a high risk that the right of private prosecution will be abused and that the institution of proceedings will cause the defendant irreparable harm. That is potentially relevant to the Bill because there is a risk that private prosecutions could be abused.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) referred to the attempted private prosecution in the Tony Bland case. There have been others. I would not describe them as an abuse of process because the law was unclear, and I attribute charitable motives to those who brought the prosecutions. They endeavoured to use the law as it was perceived and to abide by it. The hon. Member for Congleton is trying to clarify the law, but whether the Bill achieves clarification or obfuscation is a matter for debate on Third Reading. I understand that she would like specific harms to be addressed; perhaps I would also like them to be tackled. However, I do not know whether the Bill achieves that.

The Law Commission's third category is important. It covers abuse of the right to bring private prosecutions and the effect on the doctor, whose career could be completely blighted by a prosecution even if it proved unsuccessful.

If consent to prosecution is required, it begs the question whether it should be that of the Attorney-General or that of the Director of Public

[Mr. Dismore]

Prosecutions. The House is presented with both possibilities in new clauses 10 and 11. New clause 10 would provide for the consent of the DPP and new clause 11 would provide for that of the Attorney-General.

I acknowledge that there is a difficulty with consent by the DPP in current law. If consent by the DPP is required, it can currently be granted by a junior prosecutor in the Crown Prosecution Service. That would clearly be unsatisfactory in the circumstances that we are considering. The Law Commission recommendation deals with that point. It states that consent should be delegated only to the head of central casework. The Government have said that they will act on the Law Commission's recommendations on consent to prosecution. One of the key objections to making a prosecution conditional on the consent of the DPP rather than the Attorney-General has therefore been tackled.

There is a strong argument against making a prosecution conditional on the consent of the Attorney-General. The Attorney-General performs a different role from the DPP. That is highlighted in the Law Commission report. Paragraph 4.13 cites the Franks committee. It states:

> The Franks Committee was "in doubt" that there was widespread unease amongst those "outside governmental and Parliamentary circles" about the Attorney-General carrying out both political and quasi-judicial functions.

The issues in the Bill are political, although not party political—there are proponents and opponents of it in all parties. If consent lay with the Attorney-General, who is an elected politician as well a Law Officer, there would be a risk of the decisions being subject to political influence.

I have no reason to question the integrity of my noble and learned Friend the Attorney-General or my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor–General. They are both men of high professional calibre and great integrity. However, one never knows who will fill those offices in future. If my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) presses new clause 11, I will vote against it.

Consent to prosecution is important and could be incorporated in the Bill. I cannot understand the objection to it, unless those who support the Bill want access to private prosecutions. They are already subject to all sorts of controls—for example, by the DPP—that the Law Commission sets out. However, I shall not go through them, because I do not want to be accused of trying to string out the debate. Requiring consent would introduce some consistency in the Bill.

New clause 13, which my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) will move later, makes an interesting suggestion. I am afraid that I must oppose it because I do not believe that it is sensible. It states:

> This Act shall give rise to liability in tort only.

If it read "liability in tort as well", I would be keen to support it. When I examined the way in which tort applied to the circumstances covered by the Bill, I found many interesting features.

I must declare an interest; before I became a Member of Parliament, I made my living by bringing claims in tort on behalf of people injured in medical, industrial and road accidents. However, I did uncover some of the lacunae in the law when preparing for today's debate. If one wants to sue a doctor, one generally sues for clinical negligence. There have been many debates in the House and the wider community on medical negligence.

To prove medical negligence, one has to satisfy an extremely broad test—the Bolam test. The claimant has to satisfy the court that the care was not in accordance with the practice accepted as proper by a responsible body of medical opinion. The only alternative to the Bolam test deals with informed consent.

Informed consent features in the Chatterson *v.* Gerson case of 1981. That case showed that the courts take a tough line on informed consent. The lady in the case suffered unpleasant treatment, to which she claimed she had not consented because the problems had not been explained. I shall not go into the details of the case unless I am asked to do that. The lady sued for negligence and the criminal tort of battery. Battery in civil law is different from assault and battery in criminal law. I received a Library briefing on the matter. It states that the courts are uncomfortable with the idea that doctors acting in good faith could be guilty of battery in civil law. There is a lacuna in the law.

10 am

A doctor could become involved in the evils that the Bill is trying to prevent but, if he had acted in accordance with the Bolam principles and in line with a responsible body of medical opinion, he would not have committed medical negligence. Equally, consent may not arise simply because a patient is dead and there is no evidence. Therefore, the doctor could not be convicted of battery. Even if that were not the case, battery may not be sustained in tort for the reasons that I have given.

Mr. Miller: I am trying to follow my hon. Friend's arguments, but, like all lawyers, he confuses me. How is that point relevant? I see his point about the new clause tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), and look forward to listening to him, but surely medical negligence would automatically follow if the doctor had been charged with a criminal offence and successfully prosecuted under the Bill.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention because, when I began my research last night, I found that such a conclusion does not necessarily follow. Logically, it should follow that someone found guilty of a criminal offence in such circumstances has committed clinical negligence, but the doctor or those convicted of a criminal offence could still have acted in line with a responsible body of medical opinion—for example, if the British Medical Association guidance had not changed. Although he could be convicted of a criminal offence under clause 1, he would not necessarily be guilty of medical negligence at common law or of the common law tort of battery.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is in danger of addressing his learned remarks to the jury. He should address the Chair.

Mr. Dismore: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is no jury in a tort case, so I would address the judge. Were you in that capacity, I would have offended doubly.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Would my hon. Friend's point matter? Would not such a doctor

be guilty of a breach of statutory duty? Therefore, the civil remedy would follow and whether he was guilty of professional negligence would be irrelevant.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend describes a possibility, but the key issue is that the matter could be dealt with by the Bill, in part through new clause 13, which has been tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Test and would incorporate tort into the Bill. I dislike laws that are unclear and vague to the general public—my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) is a lawyer, too—and a gap could be plugged by incorporating tort. I sympathise with the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Test, but on the proposal that we should have a new tort based on the statutory duty, I answer my hon. Friends by saying that the courts would have to construe whether the act itself also gave rise to civil liability.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye will be aware of the line of cases dealing with some crimes that do not give rise to statutory duty. The most obvious example is the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974. Criminal offences were created, but no civil liability followed. A court could construe clause 1 as imposing no statutory duty actionable at common law in tort, but criminal liability only.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I have tried to follow my hon. Friend's arguments closely, but, as I am not a lawyer, I have failed. Does he accept that the difference between the Bill's wording in respect of intention and in respect of purpose creates a space that needs to be defined in terms of penalties?

Mr. Dismore: I disagree not with what my hon. Friend wants to achieve, but about whether the new clause will achieve it. If the Bill progresses, I would be one of the first to say that it is entirely appropriate for the most severe criminal penalties to flow from the creation of the new criminal offences. As the hon. Member for Congleton has said, they would be akin to murder should her Bill find favour. However, there should be civil liability in addition to—not instead of—those criminal penalties. My argument with new clause 13 is that it would take away the Bill's criminal measures. I suspect that the prime object of the hon. Member for Congleton in promoting the Bill was to put in place criminal liability, but there is room in the Bill not merely for one but for both. If we were in an either/or situation, I would take issue with my hon. Friend.

To return to consent, the parties are much more in control in civil litigation, which is a good way of getting to the truth. It may be more appropriate because the standard of proof is not as high as in the criminal law, which requires a case to be proved beyond all reasonable doubt. Decisions in civil litigation are made on the balance of probabilities. Incorporating civil liability would provide an additional option to those aggrieved by the actions of the doctor concerned. If they felt that they could not satisfy the criminal standard, they could at least take action on the civil standard.

Despite all the reforms introduced by Lord Woolf, the civil law is slow, costly and risky. Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Test, the remedies available are weak, and the courts can only award damages in these circumstances. The Law Commission's recent report on the damages that should be awarded in fatal cases severely criticises our existing law, which, for example, provides a pittance to the relatives of children who are killed, in the form of the bereavement payment of only £7,500. I have lobbied the Lord Chancellor's Department to persuade it to increase that figure. The Law Commission has made proposals to increase the damages available at civil law, but they would still be woefully inadequate. Although I agree with my hon. Friend that tort should be an option, it should not be the only one. If the Bill finds favour with the House, criminal penalties should flow from it.

New clause 15 deals with indictment, which is important. Again, we have a lacuna in that the Bill does not deal with how a trial should be carried forward. I am sure that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have been following as closely as I have the controversy in the other place and in the press at large over the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill, which deals with whether cases should be tried in Crown or magistrates courts, with particular reference to the either-way offences. We shall debate that more fully in the House in due course. I would hate to see this Bill somehow fall through the lacuna created by the mode of trial Bill because it does not address that issue.

I would support my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey), should he put his new clause to the vote to ensure that trials take place

> only on indictment in the Crown Court.

As the hon. Member for Congleton said on Second Reading, these extremely serious offences are akin to murder and, if murder is to be the benchmark for the new offence, it could be tried fairly only before a judge and jury. We must rely on the jury's good sense to decide whether the offence has been committed.

New clause 17 deals with publicity restrictions on prosecutions. If the hon. Member for Congleton does not see her way to accepting it, I shall push it to a Division. The Human Rights Act 1998 refers to article 6 of the European convention on human rights, which deals with the right to a fair trial. The new clause would provide protection for the patient in respect of whom the proceedings were brought, or perhaps the memory of that patient, as well as for the witnesses and the defendant—the doctor on trial.

Article 6 of the Convention deals with the circumstances that give rise to the right to a fair trial, and the need for trials to be conducted publicly. It goes on to say, however, that

> the press and public may be excluded from all or part of the trial in the interest of morals, public order or national security in a democratic society, where the interests of juveniles or the protection of the private life of the parties so require, or to the exient strictly necessary in the opinion of the court in special circumstances where publicity would prejudice the interests of justice.

I suspect that article 6 will be considered a fair amount once it comes into effect in the autumn. A point frequently made by the defence during the trials by tabloid that take place nowadays is that the defendant's right to a fair trial has been prejudiced by the publicity which has poisoned the minds of the jury in advance of the case. When article 6 comes into force that will be the position with knobs on. Prosecutions of doctors in these circumstances inevitably attract a huge amount of publicity long before they get anywhere near the courts. I venture to suggest that, under article 6, the defendant's position could well be prejudiced.

[Mr. Dismore]

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw mentioned the publicity surrounding the private prosecution in the Tony Bland case. In Committee, the hon. Member for Congleton referred to the prosecution of Dr. Moor, who was alleged in the Crown court to have committed murder in killing a patient suffering from cancer by administering a dose of diamorphine. Again, the media circus surrounding the case was considerable. I am pleased to say, from Dr. Moor's point of view, that he was acquitted, but, having looked at the press cuttings, I think that whether the trial was conducted fairly from the point of view of either the prosecution or the defence is open to question.

Mr. Ashton: My hon. Friend may not be aware that there have been 80 similar prosecutions in America, not one of which has been successful. In such cases, it is virtually impossible to prove anything beyond reasonable doubt.

Mr. Dismore: I think my hon. Friend is making a slightly different point. What I am concerned about is ensuring a fair trial; I am also concerned about protecting the defendant.

Mr. Trend: There is a further complexity. I know that this is not a direct parallel, but, according to the hon. Gentleman's proposals, a case such as the Shipman case might be held in camera. Surely what the hon. Gentleman calls the media circus was helpful, in terms of the public good, in the Shipman case.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman should read the new clause a little more closely. I am not saying that there should be no publicity surrounding the case; I am saying that the publicity should follow, and not necessarily precede, the case. The new clause deals with circumstances in which it is open to the judge to say at the end of the case, "All bets are off. You can talk about the defendant." If the defendant is acquitted—Dr. Shipman was not acquitted, but Dr. Moor was—the position may be rather different. Irrespective of Dr. Moor's acquittal, what was the damage to his professional reputation as a result of his unsuccessful prosecution for murder? The new clause deals with that by allowing the judge to name the defendant at the end of the trial, and to allow everything that has gone on during the trial to be reported.

To an extent that already happens. Reporting is restricted in any event during a trial, but, once it is over, plenty of publicity can follow if a conviction is secured.

10.15 am

Mr. Miller: I found myself dealing with those very circumstances when one of my constituents was charged with murder in the United States. The difficulty lay in striking a balance between publicity that was beneficial to my constituent's defence—if it could be said to be beneficial for us to be followed everywhere by the wretched media circus, both in the courtroom and outside—and no publicity. I think that it would have been better for my constituent if there had been no publicity.

I do not think that the Shipman case can be separated from that case purely on the basis of the scale of Shipman's appalling offences. I feel that there must be a general rule covering all cases. Perhaps it is best to allow the judge to make the decision. Is that what the new clause does?

Mr. Dismore: Yes and no.

Mr. Miller: Lawyers!

Mr. Dismore: Yes, it is a case of "On the one hand . . . on the other hand". My hon. Friend may have heard the old joke, "Please find me a one-handed lawyer."

If we do not address the matter in this way, by the time it reaches the judge it may be too late. If restrictions are not there in the first place and the judge tries to impose them after the event, he will be closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Dr. Whitehead: I have read the new clause carefully, and it seems to me to constitute a catch-all publicity ban in all cases brought to court under the Bill, which, as we have established, concerns purpose rather than intention. It appears that there can be a range of degrees of prosecution. In some cases, it might be argued that disclosure was in the public interest; in other, borderline cases, it might be clear that it would be difficult not to prejudice the jury. I am thinking of cases that are very finely balanced. Does my hon. Friend agree that his new clause does not distinguish between those two sets of circumstances, and thus over-eggs the pudding by failing to allow disclosure when it is clearly in the public interest?

Mr. Dismore: I see my hon. Friend's point, but I think he has misunderstood the Bill. It is an all-or-nothing Bill. My hon. Friend sees the distinction between the two sets of circumstances, and the wider public may also see it, but the Bill does not provide for the question of degree. It provides for one thing only: an extension of the law of murder. Only one count—effectively, a charge of murder—is available under the Bill, and only one sentence—life imprisonment—is available for murder under English law. There is no room for argument.

Although the circumstances were very different, Dr. Moor faced exactly the same charge as Dr. Shipman. At present, the law does not draw a distinction between Dr. Shipman and a doctor who is trying to do his best for his patient—in the case of Dr. Moor, by administering diamorphine to ease pain, but having the parallel effect of hastening death. If the Bill is passed, someone like Dr. Moor will be in exactly the same position as a mass murderer like Dr. Shipman. The restrictions that I propose are important to protect Dr. Moor, not Dr. Shipman.

Another aspect is the fear of lynch law. I say this with some diffidence, but again there is a distinction to be drawn between Dr. Moor and Dr. Shipman. After his arrest, I believe that Dr. Shipman was held in custody pending trial. Someone who is held on remand pending trial is protected to a degree in prison. Dr. Moor, however, would presumably have been out on bail pending his trial.

In the United States, people campaigning on the issue of abortion—which has some parallels with this issue—have behaved in a lynch-law manner towards doctors

accused of being abortionists. There is a website file listing the names and addresses of doctors, with old wild west-style "Wanted" posters. Four doctors and two clinical workers were killed; they were simply crossed off the list. A sniper used a high-powered rifle to kill a doctor as he stood in his kitchen. The same sniper was linked to several similar attacks on other doctors.

I am concerned that if the names of doctors who are being prosecuted get out, as they would be out on bail they would be at risk from people who felt strongly about these issues taking the law into their own hands, because we do not have the death penalty. The hon. Member for Congleton supports the death penalty. If it were in force, she would presumably be prepared for the natural consequences of her argument, so, should the Bill become law, a doctor prosecuted for murder under clause 1 would face the death penalty if convicted.

The issue of reporting restrictions is dealt with in the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999. The Government published a consultation report "Speaking up for Justice" on the treatment of vulnerable and intimidated witnesses.

I shall leave the defendant and deal with the parts of the new clause that concern the protection of witnesses and the name of the victim—the patient. It is important to bear in mind the fact that, from the prosecution point of view, we must protect witnesses—other medical professionals—not just from the ire of those who promote the causes that the Bill would prevent, but from other medical professionals who may ostracise witnesses for the prosecution who have come forward with evidence against one of their colleagues. I suspect that we have all experienced this in our professions. People who have broken ranks could be severely victimised for giving evidence for the prosecution. They are equally entitled to the protection of the law through anonymity, pending the outcome of the trial.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: My hon. Friend said that the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) was in favour of the death penalty. Is he sure about that, because my principled support for her Bill was on the basis that she believed in the sanctity of life? I would welcome his confirmation that that is what he said and what he believes to be the case.

Mr. Dismore: I understand that to be the position. The hon. Lady is in her place, and I would happily give way to her should she want to correct the record if I have misrepresented her position. I see that she is not asking me to give way, so I assume that I have correctly stated her position that she is in favour of the death penalty. It would inevitably follow from a prosecution under clause 1—because she equates withdrawal or withholding of treatment to murder—that the doctor would face execution if she had her way.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My hon. Friend will recall that when the Human Rights Bill was going through Parliament, I moved the only successful amendment against the Government, which took the death penalty completely out of British law. I also support the Bill. I hope that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) will bear that in mind.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend is correct. The death penalty is not part of United Kingdom law, and I welcome that. I have been a long-standing opponent of the death penalty. However, who knows what will happen in a future Parliament? We know from our constituency work that many people support the death penalty. Should the hon. Lady's party come to power and a future Conservative Government be filled with people like her, who knows what legislation they would introduce? If I were still here, I would vote against the reintroduction of the death penalty, but neither this Parliament nor any other can bind its successors. I am highlighting the logical consequence of the hon. Lady's beliefs.

Before the interesting intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster), I was expressing my concern about the protection of prosecution witnesses.

Mr. McNamara: I am sorry to pursue my hon. Friend on this issue, but he will recall that the Government's argument was precisely the one that he has just advanced: that one Parliament cannot bind another. The amendment that I moved does, in fact, bind a future Parliament. If we tried to alter the decision now that we have accepted the protocol on capital punishment, we would have to remove ourselves from the whole of the convention and from the Council of Europe.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are straying too far away from the new clause.

Mr. Dismore: I should be happy to engage in a debate with my hon. Friend on these issues in the Tea Room afterwards. I have made my point, and he has made his.

It is extremely important that we protect witnesses when they are giving evidence against a fellow professional. The nurse who thinks that a surgeon has done something a bit peculiar and goes to the police should be protected from the risk of victimisation by colleagues. People from whatever profession tend to close ranks against those who break them, and such medical professionals could be very exposed. Equally, witnesses giving evidence for the defence could be subject to the same pressure and intimidation as the defendant in the run-up to a trial.

That is why I think that the provisions on the protection of witnesses in the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 should be extended to prosecutions under this legislation. However, I would go further than that and offer protection to the defendant. I hope that the hon. Member for Congleton would not dispute that such protection should also be offered to the deceased. It is not right or proper that someone who is no longer with us, and who is perhaps incidental to the prosecution, should be dragged through the courts when they have not consented to it because they are not in a position to do so. The individual's memory would be examined in the court.

I hope that the House will accept new clause 10 on the consent to prosecutions by the DPP, for the reasons that I have given. Should my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow press new clause 11, I hope that the House will reject it. I shall vote against it, because I think that the DPP is the more appropriate person to give consent than the Attorney-General.

Although I agree with the sentiments expressed in new clause 13, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Test, which would bring tort into the legislation, I think that

[Mr. Dismore]

we need tort as well as criminal penalties. I support the suggestion that prosecution should only be on indictment, and I think that we need public restrictions for the reasons that I have outlined. I shall therefore press new clause 17, should it not be acceptable to the proponents of the Bill.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I believe that these new clauses are unnecessary. I do not believe that the intervention of the Attorney-General or the Director of Public Prosecutions is necessary in what I believe will be clear matters. I shall explain why the law, once the Bill is enacted, will be quite clear and why it will not be necessary for the Attorney-General to vet any prosecutions.

In our common law, it is clear that it has always been wrong to bring about another person's death except for reasons of justice. That principle is based on the inviolability of human life. It is an absolutely clear and simple principle, and it has never been necessary to test these matters with the Attorney-General, the DPP or the House—it has been clear since time immemorial. Intentionally to cause the death of an innocent person has always been to commit the crime of murder.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Leigh: May I make a little progress, as I have only just started?

The Bland case recognised that, on the contrary—this is why it is so important—murder can be committed by an act of omission as well as by a positive act. It is my belief that the judgment in the Bland case contradicted the traditional principle that every human being has an inherent worth or dignity. It follows from that that just because I or anyone else thinks that a human life is no longer worth while, we do not have the right to end it. We do not have the right to make that judgment on the worth of any human life as individuals, parliamentarians, doctors, Attorney-Generals or DPPs. Human life is inherently worth while.

10.30 am

Anthony Bland died on 3 March 1993 of thirst consequent on feeding being withdrawn. He breathed and digested food unassisted, but the court found in that case that to continue feeding him was futile. It took the view—no one else did so: not the House, not the Attorney-General, not the public—that his life was no longer worth while.

Mr. Russell: The situation affected my first daughter on a life-support machine. When the life-machine was turned off, was that euthanasia, was that murder or was that compassion?

Mr. Leigh: I realise that this is a terribly sensitive subject. I think that we are all deeply sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman and to the intervention that he has made. It underlines the great care and sensitivity with which we should approach these matters, but I hope that he will not mind my saying that we are talking about a different situation. It has always been recognised that doctors have the right to turn off a life-support machine. I will explain why, if the Bill is passed, that will continue to be the case, but I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making.

Lord Mustill said in the judgment on the Bland case:

> The acute unease which I feel about adopting this way through the legal and ethical maze is I believe due in important part to the sensation that, however much the terminologies may differ, the ethical status of the two courses of action is for relevant purposes indistinguishable—

that is, between a positive act and an omission. That is an important admission. It goes to the heart of what we are talking about.

As a result of the Bland case, the floodgates have opened. As the British Medical Association, in its 1999 document entitled "Withholding and Withdrawing Life-prolonging Medical Treatment" recognised, the Bland case opened the right to withdraw tube feeding from those with severe dementia or strokes. That is what worries my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) and others who speak on these matters.

We believe that doctors should not have discretion to pass judgment on the worthwhileness of human life. That, we believe, is incompatible with the dignity and inherent worth of life. All the Bill excludes—it is very clear; the courts can make a simple judgment—is a doctor's withdrawing treatment for the purpose of ending life. It allows doctors full discretion to take a view on whether the treatment that he is performing on the patient in very difficult circumstances is likely to benefit the patient significantly, or whether it will cause too much pain or too much discomfort for no discernible benefit.

Opposition to the Bill is, broadly speaking, based on the belief that severe decision-making problems will be imposed on doctors if the Bill is passed. Its opponents say that that is why we must have the new clauses. In fact, clause 1 is very clear. It states:

> It shall be unlawful for any person responsible for the care of a patient to withdraw or withhold from the patient medical treatment or sustenance if his purpose or one of his purposes in doing so is to hasten or otherwise cause the death of the patient.

That is clear and understandable. Let me explain why we do not need the highest Law Officers to take part in the decision. To understand clause 1, which is the guts of the Bill, we need a common-sense understanding of the word "purpose."

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that there is a difference between ordinary means of intervention, and extraordinary means of intervention, or not starting treatment? There is a difference between ordinary treatment and extraordinary treatment, as has been recognised by the Catholic bishops in their recent paper on euthanasia and the withholding of treatment. Is he suggesting that clause 1 draws a distinction? Does it give guidance to doctors and to those who care for patients as to the level of treatment that would be expected?

Mr. Leigh: I shall try to explain why clause 1 is very clear. The hon. Gentleman draws attention to what the Catholic bishops said. I would not want to disagree with them in any way, and I am not sure that I am disagreeing with them because clause 1 is very clear: it deals with a deliberate act or omission the purpose of which is to end a life.

We easily distinguish someone's purpose in taking a particular action from the consequences, even the foreseeable consequences. The mere fact of the consequences being foreseeable does not necessarily mean that any doctor would fall foul of the Bill. Thus, for example, a foreseeable consequence of regular jogging is that I wear out my footwear, but wearing out my footwear is no part of my purpose in jogging; my purpose is to go for a run, maintain my health and so on.

If I drive 200 miles across country, I use petrol. That is a foreseeable consequence of what I am doing, but that is not why I drove 200 miles across country. I drove the 200 miles because I wanted to visit my friend. Therefore, the law is very clear about purpose and foreseeable consequence. An unnecessary smokescreen has been deliberately put up to envelope the Bill. The law is very clear.

Mr. Miller: I have much respect for the hon. Gentleman's views on some of the difficult moral and ethical issues that arise both in this country and throughout the world. The other day, we took part in a debate on the matter in Westminster Hall. Am I following him correctly? Is he saying—I accept his analogy with the shoes and jogging—that purpose means intent and that, therefore, if the intent is clear, only one logical charge can be pursued under the Bill?

Mr. Leigh: Yes. Broadly, the hon. Gentleman makes a good point. That is why the new clause is important and interesting. It claims that the matter is so difficult that we will never be able to work out intent and that it somehow becomes a political issue that needs the participation of the Attorney-General or the DPP.

It makes an enormous difference both to the protection of patients and to the character of medical practice whether we allow doctors to aim at hastening the death of their patients, for if we think that it is an acceptable purpose for doctors to have, we are in effect inviting them to decide if and when their patients no longer have worthwhile lives. However, it is incompatible with a fundamental moral assumption of our law that people should be thought eligible to have their lives ended because someone has judged their lives no longer worthwhile. Hence the Bill declares unlawful the withholding or withdrawing of medical treatment or sustenance if it is part of one's purpose in doing so to end the life of the patient.

Let me deal with problems that have been raised by Members who are doctors in the House and by other doctors in the BMA—*[Interruption.]* I apologise for the term "Doctors in the House".

Mr. Bob Russell: There are three of them on the Liberal Democrat Benches.

Mr. Leigh: Yes.

Mr. McNamara: They are not a holy trinity.

Mr. Leigh: They are not. The hon. Gentleman is right.

The measure does not make unlawful the withholding or withdrawing of medical treatment if that treatment cannot or can no longer provide any therapeutic benefit, or if, in one way or another, it has become unduly burdensome to the patient. Thus, it will be reasonable to discontinue artificial ventilation of a patient when all other therapeutic interventions have failed. Artificial ventilation is characteristically employed to keep a patient alive, providing doctors with an opportunity for therapeutic interventions designed to save the patient's life.

On intent, the fact that death immediately follows the turning off a life-support machine is not part of one's purpose in discontinuing artificial ventilation, even if death is a foreseeable consequence of so doing. It is very important that we understand that point. If I turn off a life-support machine, a foreseeable consequence is that death will follow for the person on the machine. However, although that would be a foreseeable consequence, the action would not fall foul of the Bill because, quite clearly, my intention would not be to cause the death of the patient.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): First, if one knows the consequence of an action, one surely knows that the purpose of that action is to deliver the consequence. There is no distinction. Secondly, is not artificial feeding akin to artificial respiration? If either is withdrawn, the patient will die.

Mr. Leigh: We do not contend that they are akin. That is why the Bland case was so important, and the judges themselves admitted that they had such difficulty in finding their way through that moral maze. The judges themselves reached the conclusion that there was no difference between omission and a positive act. They simply took the view that Tony Bland's case was not worth while. Tony Bland could breathe and digest food. The consequence in his case was not only foreseeable, but the result of a deliberate act.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is making quite a complicated point that is more appropriate to Second Reading to justify his argument on new clause 10. Although I appreciate that, I should be grateful if he and other hon. Members could deal more directly with the new clauses in this group.

Mr. Leigh: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I realise that we are on Report. I wanted to try to conclude my speech, but there have been several interventions. I had better not give way again.

I think that I have made my point, which is quite clear. Quite simply, nothing in the Bill obstructs good medical practice. Nothing in the Bill need inspire fear in doctors. It is not necessary for us to raise the matter to the political sphere and to involve the Attorney-General and the DPP.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Leigh: No, I cannot give way. I could be called to order if I did.

All we have to do is simply to have a clear view on the worthwhileness of human life, and a clear view that doctors must not act or omit to act with the deliberate intent of ending someone's life or denying the inherent dignity of that life. The Bill is clear on those points. The new clauses are not necessary.

Mr. Ashton: I shall concentrate on new clauses 10 and 17, but especially on new clause 17. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) has made many technical and erudite points—as they should be, because we are considering a matter of law—but we should also take into account the reasons why we are debating the Bill and some of its potential consequences.

As many people know, tomorrow is the anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. On 15 April 1989, 96 young people were squeezed to death, with four more young people dying subsequently from the injuries that they sustained on that day. The disaster has led to 11 years of trauma, grief, analysis and debate—resulting ultimately in the Medical Treatment (Prevention of Euthanasia) Bill.

I was present at the Hillsborough disaster. I was no further from those who were crushed than you are, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the Strangers Gallery. I saw everything that happened on that very sad day. Other hon. Members were there as eyewitnesses. Eddie Loyden, who is now retired, was at the ground and so were my hon. Friends the Members for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp)—who was elected to the House in 1997—and for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell).

No one who went through that trauma could ever forget it. We gave evidence to the Taylor report inquiry, although not to the inquest. Just after the disaster, I became a director of the club. For many years, I have been very heavily involved in the matter and its consequences.

10.45 am

Arising from the disaster was the case, which has been mentioned many times, of Tony Bland, who was 18. He was starved of oxygen when he was crushed against the barriers for a considerable time. He was later diagnosed as being in a—it is a medical term—persistent vegetative state. His parents lived in Keighley, and he was cared for at Airedale general hospital.

About eight months after the disaster, Tony Bland's neurologist was informed by the Medical Defence Union and the district coroner that, if the doctor disconnected the feeding tube, under the law as it then stood, he could be open to a charge of murder or manslaughter.

The case dragged on for the next three or four years. In December 1991, Gary Waller, who was then the Conservative Member for Keighley, raised the issue in the House, but it did not result in a change in the law. Eventually, however, the law was changed. Let us be absolutely clear about it: the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) wants to change the law, to restore the position that applied in 1989, despite all the consequences of that law.

The case dragged on to September 1992, when Tony Bland's parents and doctor decided to apply to the High Court for a ruling on withdrawing treatment. The regional health authority and the hospital backed their case, which was based on British Medical Association advice that artificial feeding was a medical treatment and could be withdrawn. Lawyers acting for the health authority backed the case.

There was a hearing in the High Court, in November 1992, and counsel for the Official Solicitor argued that, despite the health authority's request, it would be murder to cease treatment. In November 1992, Sir Stephen Brown, president of the family division, ruled that doctors may lawfully discontinue all life-sustaining treatment and medical support measures.

The Official Solicitor announced that there would be an appeal, and stated that the case might go all the way to the Law Lords. I shall not bore the House with the details, but, again in November 1992, the case went to the Court of Appeal, which was asked to give a definitive ruling. After a three-day hearing, the Master of the Rolls said that the court was minded to dismiss the appeal. However, the court gave the Official Solicitor leave to appeal to the House of Lords, and he did that.

In their judgment, which was given on 4 February 1993, the Law Lords unanimously ruled that artificial feeding should be withdrawn. They called on Parliament to legislate on when doctors can stop "futile" medical treatment. They expressed great unease at having to rule in such a difficult sphere without legislative backing. However, they stressed that there was a crucial difference between withdrawing treatment and actively ending life. The ruling was backed by the BMA.

The Bill is intended to put the clock back to the position pertaining before the Law Lords' ruling. Although the issue has received the most intensive consideration at the highest level, the hon. Member for Congleton wants essentially to reverse that judgment.

New clause 17 deals with publicity. I am holding newspapers showing the type of publicity that Tony Bland's family had to endure. There were pages and pages of stories. For four years, every tabloid and newspaper—ranging from the most serious medical journals in the land down to the tabloids—talked about the anguish of that poor boy, who could not eat, speak, laugh or cry, and about whether he should be allowed to die. His parents sat there—day after day, year in, year out—suffering, and perhaps gaining hope whenever there was a sign that the boy might recover, but it was obvious that that would never happen. To get some mercy for their boy, they backed a legal saga that lasted years and in which lawyers analysed the issues. Imagine the anguish of the parents, when they are continually the subject of television documentaries and newspaper analysis. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon referred to the abortion demonstrations in America outside hospitals or courts. Is that a humane way to treat a person in a deep coma, who probably has no life?

Doctors have a dilemma. Some of the foremost experts in the country have said that there are 600 to 700 new cases in Britain every year and, at any one time, there are between 1,500 and 2,000 people who might be kept alive for as long as 25 or 30 years. What a macabre situation!

Professor Bryan Jennett from Glasgow, an expert on comas, says that no one has ever come out of a year-long coma. Although some have perhaps come out of one very slowly over the course of a year, they may well be severely brain damaged.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South–East): Is my hon. Friend aware of the case of Patricia White Bull in America, who came out of a coma after a substantial number of years? It is not true that people do not come out of comas after a long period.

Mr. Ashton: I hear what my hon. Friend says. There will always be arguments on the issue, but there comes a

time when politicians should listen to medical experts. We accept their rulings on industrial tribunals or disability benefits. We have no option.

Mr. McNamara: Not on disability benefits.

Mr. Ashton: We do not overrule doctors, whatever they say. That is a principle of law. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South–East (Dr. Iddon) cited one case. I am quoting not my own opinion but that of professors who specialise in comas.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: It is an incredible proposition that we have no right to question a doctor who is playing God. If what my hon. Friend says is right, do we have to accept the decision of a junior doctor last week that a woman with only a year to live from cancer should not be resuscitated, even if that were appropriate?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds, I remind him, as I have just reminded the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), that he must relate his remarks to the new clause.

Mr. Ashton: My point is about publicity. I was referring to new clause 17, which says that

> No person shall publish any material which is intended or likely to identify—
>
> (a) any patient

and the publicity that the Bland family had to suffer. There are 1,500 to 2,000 such people alive at any time. If that rolls on for 10 or 20 years and people are left alive in a coma, breathing, there will be some who have been on a life-support machine for as long as the Kray brothers or Myra Hindley have been in prison. People argue that it is time to let them out of prison, so surely it is time to end the agony of the families of such patients. Imagine the publicity that would surround such cases and the trauma for those involved. A massive number of people could be kept alive. The professor whom I was quoting earlier says that, although no one has ever come out of a coma after a year, some can live in a coma for as long as 30 years.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): In the light of the intervention from the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), I should like to give the same advice that I gave on Second Reading. A persistent vegetative state is different from a coma. The Bill would cover the withdrawal of treatment from people in a coma, but the Bland case was one of persistent vegetative state. We should be wary about accepting anecdotal evidence about either medical state, rather than concentrating on the general case.

Mr. Ashton: The hon. Gentleman is right.

The aim of the Bill is to put fear into doctors and deter them from even thinking about switching off life-support machines. They would have to think of the consequences and all the hassle. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon referred to the case of Dr. David Moor, a good friend of mine who is sitting in the Strangers Gallery today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not refer to people in the Strangers Gallery.

Mr. Ashton: I know from personal experience the publicity that surrounded Dr. David Moor. He had tremendous support in his constituency. He had to retire from his practice. I went to a public meeting in Newcastle where 400 people turned up in support of him. He could not be there, because it looked as though he faced a prosecution. He openly admitted what he had done and there was enormous publicity that put him under a great deal of stress, which he survived well. He was obviously found not guilty. The court had to be moved from Newcastle to Leeds.

Those who support the Bill intend that the fear of publicity will deter doctors from deciding to switch off a life-support machine quietly, with the agreement of all interested parties, including the family. They would not able to do that because somebody—perhaps their local Member of Parliament—would say that they were breaking the law. They would become martyrs and would have to go to court and be charged with murder.

Mr. Trend: The hon. Gentleman says that the Bill would make doctors fearful of the consequences or the publicity. I take a different view. The Bill would remove from elderly or sick people and their parents, friends and relations the fear that their doctor might end their life by refusing to give them food and drink. That is the specific aim of the Bill. We all agree that the Bland case was very difficult and I have enormous admiration for the Bland family. However difficult that case was, the judgment in that case has given rise to other difficulties, including a greater suspicion, particularly among elderly patients, that their doctors cannot be trusted and might kill them if they judge that their life is not worth living. That new fear must be dealt with.

Mr. Ashton: I could equally argue that the Doctor Assisted Dying Bill, which I introduced a few years ago, would have been welcomed by many elderly patients, because it would have allowed those diagnosed with a terminal illness to tell the specialist or consultant that they wanted the right to an assisted suicide. There are two sides to the argument. I am not trying to stop people practising their religion, but they cannot put their religion onto me. I am entitled to my beliefs, just as they are entitled to theirs. We are arguing not about beliefs, but about the human rights of individuals. I do not want to start talking about living wills or doctor assisted dying, because they are separate issues.

Without the new clause to protect relatives from publicity, the Bill could mean a repeat of the Tony Bland case, when the parents asked for the machine to be switched off after three or four years and the doctor said that he could not switch it off because that would be murder. Imagine the mass marches and demonstrations that there might be through the streets, similar to those in America about abortion, with all the paraphernalia, headlines and arguments about whether it is mercy or murder. Those who support the Bill want such publicity to deter any doctor, particularly a younger doctor or anyone who is thinking of climbing higher in their career, from using their common sense, judgment and decent humanity to say that, although a patient might be alive, they will never come off the machine. Is that humane? I do not think so. If the doctor, the family and everybody in the hospital agree that the patient will not come out of the coma, it is common sense and decency to accede to the family's wishes and switch the machine off.

11 am

Are we to return to the problems of the Tony Bland case, which spread over three or four years and caused agony for the family? Three of the other boys involved recovered and came off the life-support machine, although they were severely damaged. However, Tony Bland would never have recovered and, after 15 days or so, he died. We can argue for ever about individual cases and anecdotal evidence, such as that provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). There will always be cases such as that in the newspapers yesterday, when a patient found her hospital notes which suggested that the doctors were trying to bump her off.

There is nothing more fascinating to a large section of the public than health cases, particularly the end of a person's life. The House does not debate that subject enough. At any one time, 300,000 people—equivalent to the population of a city such as Nottingham or Newcastle—are terminally ill. The House cannot keep sweeping this matter under the carpet by setting up a Select Committee in the House of Lords, or by staggering from one individual case to another. Sooner or later, the House must face up to one fact—doctors know best. I do not think that doctors are bad people. We can end up with a Shipman, but that can happen in any profession—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am reluctant to keep interrupting the hon. Gentleman, but he is not speaking to the new clause. I would be grateful if he did so.

Mr. Ashton: I had virtually finished. I implore the House to accept the proposals, particularly the two new clauses that I have mentioned. The question of who brings prosecutions is important, and it must not be someone who feels like a private prosecution for religious or propaganda purposes. It is important that the Director of Public Prosecutions should have to bring any prosecution if the Bill is passed. Also, the practice should not be turned into a circus or provide entertainment for the general public.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) tried to argue that the Bill, and clause 1 in particular, is simple and clear. I think that the opposite is the case, and that is why it is necessary to have new clause 11 and some of the other new clauses.

If the Bill in its present form becomes law, there will be a lack of clarity. The intervention by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) illustrated the problem of definition, which is not simple. The meaning of "purpose" may be simple in common-sense terms, but the legal interpretation is not so simple. The word has been interpreted in different ways in the courts. One interpretation is the intent to commit a particular act and does not involve the state of mind. These problems mean that we need the safeguards in terms of prosecution proposed by new clause 11.

A radical change in the law is proposed, yet we hear that there is nothing in the Bill that need worry doctors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) has pointed out, doctors are worried. The British Medical Association has made it clear that it is worried about the consequences of prosecutions under the Bill in its present form. The Royal College of Nursing has done the same. Much of the debate has concentrated on doctors, but the Bill opens up the possibility also of the prosecution of anyone involved in the care of a patient, and concerns any person responsible for the care of a patient. That brings in nurses, paramedics and care workers. Organisations such as Age Concern and the Alzheimer's Society are worried about what prosecutions under the Bill might lead to. That is why we need the protection proposed by new clause 11. The decision on prosecution would have to be made at a senior level by the Attorney-General, and not as a result of private prosecution.

Mr. Miller: What is my hon. Friend's response to the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore)—that the Attorney-General is potentially subject to political interference? Does he think that that produces a risk if there are not checks and balances in the clause?

Mr. Gerrard: I understand my hon. Friend's point, and I will come to that later. There is a question in terms of consent on prosecution, and whether that consent should be a matter for the Attorney-General or the Director of Public Prosecutions. That is the essential difference between the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) and my new clause. In many ways, the reasons that we are putting forward for the new clauses coincide. We want some control over who initiates prosecutions, but we have taken a different view on that. Our intent with the two new clauses is essentially the same, and the relatively minor difference is in terms of the mechanism that ought to be adopted.

Dr. Whitehead: My hon. Friend says that the intent of the two clauses is the same. Would he say that the purpose is also the same?

Mr. Gerrard: That is an interesting intervention, which takes us into the argument of the meaning of purpose and the meaning of intent. Our purposes may be the same, although I am not sure that that would always be the case.

This is a sensitive area concerning a radical change in the law. We must be sure that any prosecutions that take place are in the public interest, given the likely effect of publicity in what are likely to be high-profile cases. The effect on the career of the doctor, nurse or carer charged will be obvious but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw has explained, the effects of these cases on the patient and the family should never be forgotten.

This week, I received a distressing letter from a constituent whose son had committed suicide. The family were dreadfully distressed by the press coverage. The cases to which the Bill applies will obviously get publicity. I support new clause 17, which refers specifically to that. In the case in my constituency, the siblings discovered through the coverage the truth about their brother's death, which was extremely distressing.

Such publicity could occur regardless of the involvement of the Attorney-General, but the prevention of vexatious or frivolous prosecutions would moderate it. No one, regardless of their attitude to the Bill, would welcome vexatious prosecutions, which would quickly bring the law into disrepute. None of us wants that to happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw said that one of the Bill's aims was to put doctors in fear of prosecution. It is rather harsh to say that that is an aim, but it would certainly be an inevitable consequence of the Bill as it stands. I tabled new clause 11 to allow doctors to feel that there is sufficient safeguard against vexatious prosecution.

In recent years, there has been a move towards more litigation in the health service. More people now consider taking action against doctors and we are moving, perhaps unfortunately, towards the position in the United States, where many doctors are constantly concerned about the possibility of legal action against them. I would be worried about doing anything to our law that increased that fear or that possibility. I do not argue for one moment that doctors should be free from the fear of prosecution if they act negligently or against the interests of their patients, but that is not what the Bill is about.

If doctors are in constant fear of prosecution, that will have a detrimental effect on their relations with their patients.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the United States, legal action is usually intended to encourage doctors to intervene—often against the interests of the patient—whereas the Bill is about doctors not intervening to continue people's lives?

11.15 am

Mr. Gerrard: That is an important point. I am not a doctor, but I do not believe that clinical judgments are necessarily objective. There will be disagreements between doctors about whether one should intervene in given circumstances. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the pressure will be towards intervention, because the failure to intervene will carry with it the risk of prosecution. That is the fundamental effect of the Bill as it stands. It reverses the current legal situation, whereby the court's primary concern is what is in the best interests of the patient. The Bill invites us to make judgments on the basis of what the doctor, the carer or the nurse has done. That is why we need the safeguards in new clause 11.

Much more attention is being given these days to the rights of patients to be involved and to have as much information as possible about their treatment. How openly will doctors discuss with patients and their families what they might or might not do if at the back of their mind there is the fear of prosecution for deciding not to intervene or to withdraw artificial sustenance. These are complex issues, and the best decisions are taken when there is the maximum trust between doctors, patients and families. The possibility of prosecution will affect the atmosphere of trust and bad decisions could result.

Dr. Iddon: If a doctor is following best practice by consulting the whole medical team, the patient—if possible—and the relatives, there will be no prosecution under the Bill, but yesterday's evidence from Age Concern showed that people are writing "555" on case notes without such consultation, and that is bad practice. The Bill is aimed at a small minority of doctors who are not following best practice.

Mr. Gerrard: I would certainly deprecate the practice of writing notes on files without consultation—that is against best practice—but however much one talks to families, there is always the possibility of people changing their view after the patient has died. Families might say that the doctor told them that things would be all right if he took a certain course of action, but that proved not to be the case. We have all seen—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying into a Second Reading debate. He must relate his remarks specifically to the new clauses under consideration.

Mr. Gerrard: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was trying to respond to an intervention and had not originally intended to stray down that line.

The rights of patients are critical and will be affected if doctors fear unreasonable prosecution. Probably most of the people I have known who have lived with a terminal illness have had AIDS. As a member of the all-party AIDS group, I have come to know many people living with HIV, and others with an AIDS diagnosis. I have listened to what such people say about how they should be treated when they reach certain points in the illness.

One person who spoke at the hearings held by the all-party group said that he had left instructions that if he entered a persistent vegetative state, he did not want to be maintained in that state. He was very clear on that point. If a doctor follows that instruction, would he or she be in fear of prosecution under the Bill?

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): That point was raised several times on Second Reading and in Committee and the law on that practice would not be affected in any way by my Bill.

Mr. Gerrard: I have heard that opinion expressed, but I have also heard exactly the contrary opinion expressed. The BMA think that the Bill will make a difference, and it represents the people who will have to operate under the law. I am always wary, as a non-lawyer, of being so certain of my opinion of what effect a Bill will have, especially if a lawyer tells me that it will have the opposite effect. We should listen to the BMA's views on that point.

I was asked why my new clause applies to the Attorney-General rather than the Director of Public Prosecutions. It is true that the situation is confused at the moment, with the Attorney-General granting some consents and the DPP granting others. The officeholder is specified in the statute creating the offence, and that is why we have ended up in confusion. No overview has been taken and the approach has been piecemeal. Some Acts have contained provision for decision by the Attorney-General and some for decision by the DPP, and that confusion continues with new clauses 10 and 11.

The Attorney-General has a duty to consider the general circumstances of the case and to see whether he thinks that any of the provisions of the Act can be used against the defendant. If the Attorney-General believes that they can, he can give his consent in wide terms for the prosecution to take place. It is assumed that the Attorney-General will have made the necessary inquiries before he gives consent.

[Mr. Gerrard]

I understand the argument advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon that the Attorney-General has a political as well as a legal function, but my concern about his suggestion that the DPP should decide is about seniority. As my hon. Friend accepted, at the moment if a decision is taken by the DPP it can be taken at a relatively low level in the DPP's office, whereas if the Attorney-General takes the decision it is taken at a senior level by someone who is an experienced Law Officer. I certainly cannot recall any cases in which the judgment of the Attorney General on a matter of law has been questioned.

My hon. Friend suggested that the situation should be changed. The Law Commission has considered that and concluded that the right to a private prosecution is a useful function and that we should be careful about circumscribing that right. Indeed, where it is circumscribed, the decision should be taken at a high level. The Law Commission suggested a review of the current position across the law as a whole, not just in individual Bills, to decide which cases should go to the DPP and which to the Attorney-General, at what level the decisions should be taken, and what safeguards should be introduced. At the moment, the safeguard that my hon. Friend suggested—that the decision must be taken at a high level within the DPP's office—does not exist. It is still possible for a decision to be taken at a relatively low level, and that is why my new clause takes a different approach.

The reasons behind the new clauses are very similar, and my hon. Friend and I approach the issue from a similar point of view. We agree about the need for safeguards, but we differ about the mechanism. My reason for preferring the decision to be be taken by the Attorney-General is, as I have said, seniority. However, I realise that my hon. Friend's clause is first in the group, and we will probably not have a Division on my new clause because his will have been passed. I hope so, because I certainly want a safeguard to be added to the Bill. Although I would prefer my new clause, I would rather have my hon. Friend's than no safeguard at all.

New clause 17 concerns publicity. Safeguards on the publicity that can be given to cases that might be covered by the Bill are needed for the doctor, nurse or carer whose career might be affected. We are all aware of the possible effects of a prosecution, whether eventually successful or not. The fact that someone has been prosecuted can have serious effects on them. However, safeguards are also important for patients and their families for whom identification from a newspaper report might cause problems at work or with friends and other family members. The safeguards in new clause 17 would be very important if the Bill became law.

Dr. Brand: New clause 10 or new clause 11—I would favour new clause 10 for the reasons that have been set out—would be essential should the Bill become law. It is essential that someone should review each case because the Bill, although very short, is extremely ambiguous. To me, it is extremely clear, but my clarity is different from the clarity expounded by the Bill's supporters. The Bill's proponents say that the Bill would not affect cases where doctors and nursing teams are reported to have acted responsibly in caring for patients.

11.30 am

The real discussion hinges around the Tony Bland case. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) said that the Bill would take us back to the position obtaining before the Bland judgment, but I think it would go further. The Bill does not differentiate between ordinary and extraordinary treatment—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I get the impression that the hon. Gentleman is not going to speak to the new clauses before the House. I remind him that this is not a Second Reading debate, and that he must direct his remarks specifically to the new clauses.

Dr. Brand: I am dealing with new clause 10, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Bill's purpose is so ambiguous that we need a neutral body to determine whether a prosecution is covered in the way that the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) intends, or whether it is a product of the drafting of the Bill. That is a profound difficulty, and new clause 10 would at least provide a safeguard to protect doctors who have acted appropriately.

I am sorry that new clause 48 was not selected for debate, as it would have clarified the extent of the Bill's intent or purpose. I am not debating new clause 48, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it might have reduced the need for new clause 10. We need a person to take a view on the appropriateness of a prosecution. For the reasons already discussed, it is probably better that that person should be a senior officer in the Crown Prosecution Service.

I understand the thinking behind new clause 17, but I am uneasy about offering special privileges to any profession. The provision to protect patients, their carers and relatives is important, but once the evidence has been produced to warrant a prosecution—deemed to be in the public interest under new clause 10, if that is accepted—that prosecution should be conducted in public.

I shall use myself as an example of my concern that the police should get advice about the creation of a screening procedure against vexatious complaints. On Second Reading, I made some remarks to which one lady objected. She badgered the media and the Hampshire police until the police eventually issued a press statement that they were investigating her complaint. I do not believe that the police had screened the worthiness of the complaint that was made. No doubt, the lady felt very strongly about the issue—people do get very emotional about it—but her message on my answering machine, to the effect that she was out to destroy me and that I should be imprisoned, convinced me that she was not acting in the public interest, but wanted to get at me.

I have no objection to that, but I heard about the police investigation only when I was telephoned by a journalist who had received the statement from the Hampshire police. In fact, my son read about it first in *Metro*, the free news sheet. That is pretty shocking.

That example illustrates that there is a need for a screening procedure. The Crown Prosecution Service should be able to advise the police. Interestingly, the code of practice being revised by the CPS does not mention advising on how extensive an investigation should be before a prosecution is mounted.

Mr. Miller: I have done a lot of work on road deaths, and I very much agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about

the rights of families. However, the lady in the case involving the hon. Gentleman could have tipped off the press that she was going to make a complaint. A story could have been running before the police got involved. With or without the new clause, the hon. Gentleman would have suffered the same intrusion on his civil liberties.

Dr. Brand: On the Monday, I was contacted by a journalist who told me that she had heard a rumour that the Hampshire police were about to investigate me. I said that I had heard nothing about it, so thought that the story was only a rumour and did not pursue it. The fact that the Hampshire police confirmed that they had received a complaint and that they were investigating it created the story. Publicity cannot be stopped, but vexatious complaints can be screened earlier. In that way, the police and the CPS could decide whether a further investigation was helpful, and an appropriate use of resources.

New clause 10 is essential because we have not been reassured about the extent of the Bill or how it would affect established practice. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) spoke movingly about his daughter, and two little nephews of mine died under very similar circumstances. The life-support machines were an extraordinary means of keeping those children alive: switching them off resulted in their deaths.

That was the purpose of the action, because the continued existence of those babies was not deemed to be in their interest. The Bill would put doctors at risk of prosecution, so I would want a sensible, fairly senior person who could construe the legislation to make some sense of the situation.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Although I may not be sufficiently senior or sensible for the hon. Gentleman, I believe that common sense dictates, and it is the intention of my Bill, that in such cases, the life-support machine would be turned off because the treatment was futile. He knows perfectly well that life-support machines are turned off only at the very end when the body is dying.

Mr. Miller: That is not in the Bill.

Mrs. Winterton: It does not need to be in the Bill. As treatment would be futile, the hon. Gentleman would still be able to turn off the machine. Only if his purpose was to kill the patient would it be unlawful.

Dr. Brand: That was a good illustrative intervention. Nowhere in the Bill is futility mentioned. The Bill is concerned with the termination of life.

Mrs. Winterton: It is present practice.

Dr. Brand: The Bill makes no mention of present practice. When I tried to test the provision in Committee by referring to different scenarios, I was told, "That will not be affected. It is present practice." The hon. Lady is trying to pick and choose from present practice without specifying in the Bill what is acceptable. That is no way of protecting patients or those who look after them.

Dr. Tonge: Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps the nub of the problem is that, although the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) may understand the purpose of her Bill, she does not fully appreciate its consequences?

Dr. Brand: I wish that I had put it as eloquently as that.

The Bill is supposed to clarify something, but I am afraid that it creates obfuscation. That is why we need new clause 10; equally, it is why we do not need the Bill.

Dr. Whitehead: I wish to speak to new clause 13, which is in my name. It is a short and simple clause that provides that the Bill

shall give rise to liability in tort only.

Although it is brief, it covers a number of complex issues that go to the heart of the Bill.

The new clause involves the potential liability of doctors, or anyone else involved in the treatment of a patient, in circumstances where there may be doubt about what is in the patient's interests, and where not zealously pursuing a particular course of treatment could be regarded as having the purpose of terminating the patient's life. Therefore, if a doctor or anyone else involved with that medical treatment does not pursue it zealously, they could be liable to prosecution.

The problem with liability to prosecution under the Bill, as I understand it and as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) made clear earlier, is that the Bill provides for only one sort of prosecution. A doctor or paramedic accused of an offence under the Bill would be prosecuted for murder. If they were found guilty, they would be liable to the penalties for murder, which are severe.

11.45 am

The hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) spoke about present practice. Juries are extremely concerned about the idea that a doctor or anyone else involved in looking after patients—often in difficult, trying and unfortunate circumstances—should be tried for murder. Having heard about the case of Dr. Moor, we could argue that juries are faced with a very different set of circumstances from what we understand, by common definition, to be murder, when the accused person defends himself by saying that he was acting in good faith and according to the best interests of the patient. They then have to decide whether that is truly the case or whether something happened that was not really in the best interests of the patient or whether the doctors overstepped the mark in respect of what should or should not have been done in terms of medical treatment. Is that strictly comparable to another case in which someone has shot their victim with a gun, clearly with the intention of killing them, and has obviously committed murder?

Juries ask themselves whether they can really proceed with a conviction when common sense tells them that the two sets of circumstances are very different indeed. It appears to be the case that, in certain circumstances, juries have refused to convict because they did not agree with the charge, even if it could be proved in legal terms that the doctor concerned had done something which had hastened the death of the patient, as they did not consider that the penalty should be the same as that for shooting someone in the head with a gun.

At first sight, there is a common-sense case for saying that we are dealing with issues that have a wide range of definition, but the Bill does not allow for that. In addition, the wording of the Bill does not follow that of other legislation—the Bill talks about "purpose" rather than "intention".

[Dr. Whitehead]

The hon. Member for Congleton said at a press conference on 18 January that she was not a vitalist—that is, someone who believes that medicine should be used to prolong life, whatever the circumstances. She has made it clear again this morning that she believes that doctors are entitled to take into account issues relating to the quality of life when deciding whether to withdraw or withhold treatment.

Logically, the hon. Lady must conceive of circumstances in which treatment that does not absolutely prolong life, or in which withholding a treatment and thereby shortening life, is acceptable and not a crime, and that someone who has taken such a decision should not face a charge of murder and prosecution through the courts.

The British Medical Association attempts to underline that point in its guidance. It defines the primary role of medical treatment as being

> to benefit the patient by restoring or maintaining the patient's health as far as possible, maximising benefit and minimising harm. If treatment fails, or ceases to give a net benefit to the patient (or if the patient has competently refused the treatment) that goal cannot be realised and the justification for providing the treatment is removed. Unless some other justification can be demonstrated, treatment that does not provide net benefit to the patient may, ethically and legally, be withheld or withdrawn and the goal of medicine should shift to the palliation of symptoms.

So the hon. Lady and the British Medical Association agree that there are circumstances in which the zealous pursuit of medical treatment under all circumstances is not absolutely necessary.

However, the problem can be seen when we read the Bill itself. It states:

> It shall be unlawful for any person responsible for the care of a patient to withdraw or withhold from the patient medical treatment or sustenance if his purpose or one of his purposes in doing so is to hasten or otherwise cause the death of the patient.

Therefore, at first sight, clause 1 does not allow the leeway that both the hon. Lady and the wise guidance from the BMA says should be allowed. The issue is clouded by the deliberate use of the word "purpose" rather than "intention".

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as both the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) and the BMA oppose the practice of euthanasia, it should not be impossible to come up with amendments that meet the concerns of both and that command consensus in the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind hon. Members that we must confine our debate to the new clauses and not stray from them?

Dr. Whitehead: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My intention in tabling my new clause was to address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey). There must be ways in which the fierceness of clause 1 can be tempered by elements that do not contravene the intentions of the hon. Member for Congleton, but enable the legislation to be operated in a way that recognises people's perception of the real issues.

The Bill makes the issue less, not more, clear by the use in clause 1 of the word "purpose" rather than "intention". It is interesting to review the illuminating debate that took place in Committee on the difference between those words. The hon. Member for Congleton spoke at some length on the subject, but she said two different things. First, on the question why she had deliberately chosen to use the word "purpose", not "intention", she said:

> If I had used the word "intention" in clause 1, it could arguably have been claimed that we wanted to outlaw anything that would have had the side effect or double effect of hastening or causing death. That would, of course, be an intolerable restriction on medical care.

However, having argued that she had used one word and not the other because of the difference in their meaning, she said later:

> The definition of purpose may be legally obtuse, but it is understood in common law and in the understanding of people. We sometimes judge things legalistically. Everybody understands what purpose means and is. I have said at length that it is equivalent to intent.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 16 February 2000; c. 41-42.]

She added, "If the hon. Gentleman"—referring to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand)—"believes that intent"—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is reading out excerpts from Committee proceedings, but we cannot go over what happened there at too great a length. I should be grateful if he addressed his remarks specifically to the new clauses.

Dr. Whitehead: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I remind the House of those exchanges in Committee because I believe that it is necessary to bear them in mind when considering the question of penalties, with which my new clause deals specifically. It is important to understand what we mean when we speak of "intention" and "purpose". My view is that the two words cannot simply be substituted for each other; their meanings differ.

I confess that I am not a lawyer, although my wife is; nor am I a doctor, although my brother is. I have the best of all worlds, in that I can listen to the issues without being deeply involved in any specific case. In attempting to make sense of the legal minefield into which the Bill takes us, I did not immediately reach for the law books. Instead, I reached for the "Oxford Shorter Dictionary", which defines "intention" as being, among other things:

> A concept formed by directing the mind towards an object.

The word "intent" is defined as

> the act or fact of intending; intention, purpose . . . A design, a project. Assiduous effort; a design or project . . . intent observation.

That suggests that the mind is focused on an action; the purpose is clear and the individual is about to do or is doing something.

Although the word "purpose" crops up in the long definition of "intention", the word "purpose" has—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has not yet demonstrated the relevance of his remarks to the new clause before the House. Standing Orders insist that that is done, and I should be grateful if he now did so.

Dr. Whitehead: I thank you for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall now go straight to the demonstration itself.

As I understand it, under the law as it currently stands, if one has the intention of doing something, the law is clear. Indeed, one of the primary purposes of the prosecution in, for example, a case of murder, is to establish that the individual who allegedly committed the crime had the intent to commit murder—to deprive someone of his or her life. Much time is spent in court attempting to demonstrate that the accused has a guilty mind, mens rea, and that he or she had the intention of doing something and is, therefore, guilty of murder.

The existing law therefore protects patients from a doctor who is intent on killing them. If a doctor intends to kill a patient, no special new law is needed to decide what should happen to the doctor. A doctor who is charged with intending to kill someone will be subject to the usual tests through the court. If the intention to kill is proved, he will be found guilty of murder. In the desperately tragic recent case concerning Dr. Shipman, it was clear that the doctor had the intention of killing his patients. He failed in his duty of care. There was not a shadow of a doubt about that: he clearly intended to commit murder, and he was prosecuted under the existing law of the land.

However, a different word is used in the Bill. That is why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was attempting to tease out the distinction between the two words. The Bill introduces the word "purpose". As I mentioned, I am not a lawyer. I shall rehearse briefly what I understand to be the common-sense distinction between "purpose" and "intention".

For example, if I were the person responsible for the entire conduct of Government business, which is not very likely—*[Interruption.]* My hon. Friends are supportive of that idea. I might have a purpose to bring about a minimum wage for everybody, and I might declare that purpose in an election manifesto, but I might not have brought about the minimum wage or done much about it. All I have said is that it is my purpose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman seems to be having grave difficulty in understanding my earlier entreaties. Unless he can bring his remarks back to the new clause before the House, perhaps he will consider completing his remarks.

Dr. Whitehead: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Of course I accept your guidance. I am sorry that I have failed in my attempts to draw a distinction between "purpose" and "distinction" and show the relationship to liability in tort as opposed to criminal liability.

In order to establish criminal liability, it is clear to me that the person must be shown to have an intention to do something. At the beginning of my remarks, I mentioned that juries had found it difficult to equate in their minds the difficult and sad cases that have occurred with what they thought they were supposed to do—that is, to consider whether a person had the intention of murdering someone and therefore should be found guilty of murder. As a result, juries have simply acquitted people.

If the Bill is passed, a new offence will be created—namely, having as one's purpose the hastening of someone's death by not providing medical treatment. When we consider the distinction between the criminal prosecution of an individual for murder and prosecution under the Bill, there is a gap, because the reference to "purpose" rather than "intention" is not followed up in the Bill by the consequences of that distinction.

My new clause suggesting that liability should exist in tort attempts to fill that gap. Not being a lawyer, I had to satisfy myself about the meaning of "tort". It refers to a civil wrong, such as negligence or nuisance. It is related to but is distinct from contract, and it is therefore not enforced in the criminal courts.

The purpose of the new clause is to deal with the circumstance in which someone apparently has the purpose of hastening the death of a patient through the withdrawal of medical treatment but, because the two words are distinct, does not in law have the intention of murdering that person. That gives rise to the suggestion that a tort has been committed, rather than a criminal act that is obviously prosecutable under the criminal law.

For the Bill's supporters, one of the advantages of considering liability for tort is that an offence of tort that is enforced in the civil courts requires a lesser standard of proof—the balance of probabilities rather than beyond reasonable doubt. When a doctor is before the courts on a murder charge, proof beyond reasonable doubt is difficult to establish.

When all the difficult highways and byways of a doctor's precise actions, of who gave or did not give informed consent, and in the circumstances which a person who is unconscious might be deemed to give consent are considered, proof beyond reasonable doubt that the doctor intended to deprive the patient of life is difficult to establish. A liability in tort, which is enforceable in the civil courts, would sweep away many difficulties and ambiguities in the Bill.

My final argument relates to a current problem—as far as I understand it as a non-lawyer—with the law of battery. A person who medically treats another without that person's informed consent may be guilty of battery in law. If the Bill was passed, a doctor who attempted to understand his or her duties under clause 1 would have to set that alongside the potential for being liable in tort for battery if he or she provided treatment under clause 1 without the consent, or perhaps against the express wishes, of the patient or the patient's relatives. Relating the penalty to liability in tort would clarify clause 1. If that happened, the doctor would not be liable under criminal law and a different course of legal action would be taken.

New clause 13 acknowledges that the clause requires clarification but would also help to provide it so that we do not have a law which, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight said, would cause doctors simply to question whether a clinical judgment would render them liable for criminal prosecution. No hon. Member would wish that on people who carry out difficult medical procedures, often in distressing circumstances that those of us who are not doctors have not experienced or considered.

I ask the hon. Member for Congleton to consider seriously whether new clause 13 would bring clause 1 in touch with common sense. It would show understanding of what it is to be a doctor and to undertake the practices that we have discussed. We must consider carefully what penalties should be visited on people who find that they have not acted entirely as they wanted under difficult circumstances. We have the criminal law to protect us from those who intentionally go out of their way to murder, and I suggest that a separate offence dealt with by tort should be established to meet the concerns raised by the Bill.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: I must say, wryly, that I am immensely flattered that so much time, trouble, effort and energy has gone into drafting new clauses whose sole purpose is to wreck the Bill. Its opponents are filibustering and merely playing games. People outside the House will observe that and reach their own conclusions about the actions of those who oppose progress by such means. They will also observe that this is the second Friday on which progress on private Members' business has been thwarted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) pointed out that no substantive amendments were tabled in Committee, although, I hasten to add, I ensured that there was more than adequate time so to do. That backs up my point that everything that has been done today is intended to kill the Bill. I hope that people will note that.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Winterton: No, I do not intend to give way. I was very generous on Second Reading and in Committee, but, because of time pressure, I shall make only a few pertinent remarks.

On new clauses 10 and 11, it has been said many times that the Bill's aim is to restore the integrity of the law against purposeful killing. When a doctor is charged with killing a patient by committing an act, the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions is not required. Why, then, should it be required if a doctor is charged with killing a patient by omission? The same is true of the Attorney-General. If the Bill becomes law, prosecutions will take place not under it, but under the common-law offence of murder.

In response to the personal point made against me on my views about capital punishment under specific circumstances and my support of pro-life causes and for life at its beginning and its end, I remind the House that common law has always upheld the inviolability of life, except in the administration of justice. Tony Bland had committed no crime and the intention was that he should be killed by the withdrawal of treatment.

On new clause 13, the Bill seeks to restore the criminal law's prohibition against purposeful killing, which existed before the Bland case judgment in 1993. In so doing, it would promote a patient's right not to be purposely killed, as described in article 2 of the European convention on human rights. Liability in tort is completely inadequate for such an offence. Killing by an act is not simply liable in tort, so why should killing by omission be so?

New clause 15 is unnecessary. The offence is murder, which is indictable, and the law should be consistent with that for murder by an act. On new clause 17, the law should be the same as if a person had been charged with murder by an act. Dr. Shipman and his victims were identified. Why should not those charged with purposeful killing by omission be similarly treated?

I want to move from the legal cat's cradle that has been created this morning to put a few salient points on record. Under the Bill, a patient's right to refuse treatment would remain exactly as at present. It would in no way become conditional on the doctor's total mindset, as has been suggested. In a recent letter to me, the Minister stated:

> I do not believe that doctors should under any circumstances be allowed intentionally to kill their patients, whether by action or omission, and they are not allowed to do so under the present law.

The Minister's statement is very welcome, although it does not have legal effect, and constitutes no guarantee that the law is as the Government think it is. In the Bland case, a majority of the Law Lords, if not all, judged that the doctor's intention—or purpose—in withdrawing tube feeding would be to kill the patient, and held that the doctor would nevertheless be acting lawfully. I should be grateful if the Minister would respond to that point.

12.15 pm

It has been claimed this morning that the concept of purpose includes foresight. That calls into question the principle of double effect. Neither in law nor in common sense is there the slightest reason for saying that purpose includes foresight. If the Bill had used the term "intent", there would have been some basis in law—though none in common sense—for including foresight.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) claimed that, under the Bill, a doctor's knowledge that a patient's life would be shortened by his action in withholding treatment would make such an action unlawful. The basis of the Bill is that a doctor who decides to withhold treatment from a patient on the ground that it would be excessively burdensome or futile has no purpose of shortening life, even if he foresees that the withholding will have that effect. The good effect is release from burdensome treatment; the detrimental effect is death. The doctor must not have any purpose of causing death: I hope that that is clear.

I do not wish to delay the House further. As most of the other points that have been raised were answered fully on Second Reading and in Committee, I merely ask the House to vote against the new clauses in due course. The simple purpose of the Bill is to restore the integrity of the law to pre-1993, so that it is unlawful for a doctor to have the purpose of killing a patient by an action of omission. That would bring the law into line with the present law, under which it is unlawful for a doctor to kill a patient purposefully by an act of commission.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I had planned to listen to the speeches of all who have tabled new clauses and amendments before responding, but I will address my comments to the new clauses under discussion.

The five new clauses raise some of the concerns about the drafting of the Bill that the Government have identified throughout our debates. I have made our concerns known, and have pointed out that, as drafted, the Bill will not achieve the aims of the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton). I do not believe that the new clauses resolve those concerns; while some are helpful, others raise more questions than they answer. I want to spell out the Government's response to those new clauses, but first I must put on record the Government's complete and continued opposition to euthanasia—to the intentional taking of life, even with merciful motives or at the patient's request. That is, and will remain, illegal.

New clauses 10 and 11 highlight what the Government consider to be an important drafting flaw in the Bill. They raise the question of who should decide whether a

prosecution should take place—the Director of Public Prosecutions, in the case of new clause 10, or the Attorney General, in the case of new clause 11.

Mr. Trend: The Minister said that the Government's definition of euthanasia was the intentional removal of life. In the Bland case, the Law Lords all agreed on that point. Lord Lowry, for example, said that

the intention to bring about the patient's death is there.

The Law Lords were desperately realistic about what happened to Tony Bland. There was the intention to kill him, and that is what happened. He died through starvation. How does that square with the Government's definition of euthanasia, which they say they are against?

Yvette Cooper: I shall attempt to answer the hon. Gentleman's question, and in doing so also to answer the question raised by the hon. Member for Congleton.

To withdraw available treatment that is in the best interests of the patient when the doctor has a duty of care and when the patient has not refused such treatment is unlawful. In the Bland case, the question at issue was what was in the best interests of the patient. That is why current case law depends on what is in the best interests of the patient, whereas the Bill would instead shift the focus on to the purpose or one of the purposes of the doctor.

New clauses 10 and 11 deal with who should decide whether to prosecute. As the Bill stands, it does not say that anyone—either the Director of Public Prosecutions or the Attorney-General—should make the decision to prosecute, and it does not make it clear whether to prosecute at all, because it does not provide for an offence. It says that to withdraw or withhold medical treatment or sustenance if the purpose or one of the purposes is to hasten or cause death "shall be unlawful", but it does not say that it is an offence. Had it specified that it was an offence, it would have brought the Bill clearly within the remit of the criminal law. Without those words, it remains unclear what type of prosecution could be brought under this legislation, if any, and what sanctions could be applied, giving rise to many of the questions raised around these new clauses.

The issue of sanctions and penalties is the subject of the next group of amendments, so I shall not deal with it now. The issue of whether an offence has been committed, and therefore what type of prosecution could be brought and who should make the decision about whether to bring it, is extremely important.

The decision facing the DPP or the Attorney-General would be what kind of offence had been committed, and, in the absence of a clear statement that an offence had been committed, whether to prosecute under the criminal law.

New clauses 10 and 11 ask the House to choose between the DPP and the Attorney-General, or to leave the matter to the Crown Prosecution Service, as in the Bill as drafted. At the moment, the question of who should make a decision under particular laws is extremely complex. We cannot look to any Act of Parliament to determine which prosecutions should require the prior consent of the Attorney-General. Where such consent is required, the requirement is set out in the statute dealing with the offence. Although a wide range of crimes require the Attorney-General's prior consent to prosecution, most offences do not need his consent or that of the DPP.

Most decisions to prosecute are made by the Crown Prosecution Service, which must apply a dual test. First, it must decide whether there is sufficient evidence to mount a prosecution, and if it is satisfied about that, it must decide whether it is in the public interest for a prosecution to be launched. Those decisions are made by Crown prosecutors throughout the land, day in, day out. That would be the status of the Bill without either new clause 10 or new clause 11.

The Law Commission has considered this issue in great detail, and has pointed out that there are diverse areas where the Attorney-General's consent is currently required by statute, but there seems to be little rhyme or reason why his consent is required in some cases and not in others. The Attorney-General's consent is required for prosecutions under legislation ranging from the Biological Weapons Act 1974, to the Aviation Security Act 1982, to the Theatres Act 1968. It is hard to see a specific thread running through those Acts that could provide guidance for the House on whether the Attorney-General should pronounce on cases such as these.

Equally, the cases for which the DPP needs to give consent are extremely varied, ranging from the Agricultural Land (Removal of Surplus Soil) Act 1953, the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, to the Charities Act 1985 to the Gas Act 1986. That means that there is no coherent system for the House to apply in choosing between the new clauses. As a result, there is good reason to be extremely cautious about introducing and accepting either new clause 10 or 11.

When the Law Commission considered the matter in 1997, it issued a consultation paper called "Criminal Law: Consents to Prosecution." It runs to more than 100 pages. I confess that I have not read it, but it make some important points. The commission notes that, where consent is required, it is often impossible to find any rationale for why that consent should be applied. It points out that one of the consequences of requiring consent, either of the Attorney-General or of the DPP, is that it will provide a hurdle to private prosecutions. Hon. Members will know that private prosecutions are brought by private individuals, not by the prosecuting authorities. The new clauses would provide hurdles for private prosecutions under the Bill. I understand supporters of the new clause have exactly that issue in mind.

The commission's view was that the right to bring a private prosecution fulfils an extremely useful function and should be circumscribed by consent provisions only where there is a very good reason for doing so. It concluded that consent provision is justified in narrow circumstances: where, for example, an offence may involve national security or have some other international element.

The commission set out guiding principles for determining whether consent provision should attach to any particular offence, which may be useful for the House in determining whether to support new clauses 10 or 11. It concluded that it is justifiable to include consent requirements only in three categories of case. It is not clear that the Bill falls into any of those categories. That raises doubt about the acceptability of either new clause.

The commission recommends that the consent provisions should be used to control prosecution in each of only three categories: first, where it is very likely that a defendant will reasonably contend that prosecution for

[Yvette Cooper]

a particular offence would violate his or her convention rights; secondly, where the issues involve national security, or have some international element—offences would be regarded as involving an international element if they were about the international obligations of the state, measures to combat terrorism, measures to introduce response to international conflict, or had some bearing on international relations; and thirdly, where offences create a high risk that the right of private prosecution will be abused and the institution of proceedings will cause the defendant irreparable harm.

The commission rejected the idea that consent requirements should be used to prevent prosecutions where there were problems about evidential weakness, imprecise offences, offences attracting vexatious and trivial prosecutions, and cases that failed to take account of mitigating factors.

The commission specifically considered the position of doctors and manslaughter and whether consent requirements should be used to control prosecutions of individuals whose working lives are likely to be substantially damaged if prosecuted, even if they are subsequently acquitted. It concluded that those are not cases where the prosecution should be controlled by a consent requirement.

Mr. Dismore: I presume that my hon. Friend was listening to the reasons that I gave earlier as to why the new clause could be distinguished from the position in the Law Commission report. The most important one was that the commission considered the position from the point of view of an existing offence—manslaughter—not in the context of the new offence created by the Bill, which is equivalent to murder. The two are qualitatively different in terms of both scale and the fact that a specific offence is being created. The new clause would deal with the offence, not the individual, so it would apply whether the individual were a doctor or an individual carer.

Yvette Cooper: I accept that the Law Commission did not consider the specific question of doctors and manslaughter, and that there are important arguments about needing to prevent the right of private prosecution from being abused in this case. However, I still think that it is unclear whether the cases that we are considering fall into the categories listed by the Law Commission.

Mr. Miller: Perhaps the Department of Health could look back a little further in history and consider the Law Commission reports on involuntary manslaughter, on which I gave evidence in the context of road deaths. Perhaps serious consideration of that by the Department could provide a sensible route in the matter.

12.30 pm

Yvette Cooper: I shall certainly further consider the points made by my hon. Friend.

In its recommendations, the Law Commission specified that the category of offences that should require the consent of the Attorney-General, rather than that of the Director of Public Prosecutions, should be confined to those involving national security or an international element. Clearly, those matters are not at stake in the Bill. Therefore, new clause 11—which refers to the Attorney-General, rather than to the Director of Public Prosecutions—makes only a tenuous link.

The Government accept that the current consent requirements need reform. My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General answered a written parliamentary question from the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on precisely that issue. He said that we need to reform the current consent requirements; further consider the issues and determine in precisely which cases it is appropriate; to apply those requirements.

Given that the Solicitor-General is considering the matter, the Government are extremely unwilling to increase the number of cases that would require the consent of either the Director of Public Prosecutions or the Attorney-General. I appreciate that those who support this group of new clauses are trying to introduce safeguards against improper prosecutions. However, pending further work and decisions on rationalisation of consent issues, and without compelling reason to do so, the Government would not welcome further increases in the number of cases requiring consent.

New clauses 13 and 15 raise a different issue. New clause 13 deals with the matter of tort. Were new clause 13 to be accepted, it would clearly provide that to withdraw or withhold treatment in the circumstances specified in the Bill was a civil wrong and not a criminal wrong. That would have obvious consequences both in the penalties to be applied and on the standard of proof required. The provision also would not satisfy the hon. Member for Congleton, who said quite explicitly on Second Reading that her aim was to restore what she described as the fundamental integrity of the law of murder.

So far, our proceedings in the House and in Committee have been based on the premise that to breach the Bill would create criminal liability, rather than civil liability. A tort which is a civil wrong, such as negligence or nuisance, would not be enforced in the criminal courts. If the Bill were to give rise to liability in tort alone, it would differ in a very important respect from the law on criminal liability, as an offence under the Bill would be proved on a lesser standard of proof—the balance of probabilities, rather than beyond reasonable doubt.

Such a change—rather than requiring the offence to be proved on a criminal standard of proof—would make it highly probable that more medical practitioners would fall within the Bill's provisions. The House should take that issue very seriously. It makes even more pertinent the Government's concerns about emphasis on "purpose" or "one of his purposes" rather than on the best interests of the patient.

If the new clause were accepted, the prosecution would have to prove that, on the balance of probability, one of the doctor's purposes was to hasten the patient's death. For the doctor who is faced with a patient who refuses treatment, the decision whether to respect that refusal, in the clear knowledge that it will hasten the patient's death, is a daunting one. The doctor knows that her patient will die more quickly without treatment, and that the courts have to prove merely that, on the balance of probability, that was one of her purposes. The Government fear that that will put doctors in a very difficult position in deliberating on whether it is possible for them to respect a patient's decision. It is highly probable that more medical

practitioners would fall within the provisions of the Bill were the new clause to be accepted. More patients could then find themselves at risk of having treatment that they had refused forced on them.

The hon. Member for Congleton has tried to make it clear that, as she understands it, the Bill would not jeopardise a patient's ability to refuse treatment and the doctor's obligation to respect that refusal. I understand that she makes that point in good faith, but I disagree with her interpretation of how the law would be applied.

Mrs. Ann Winterton *rose in her place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question put, That the Question be now put:—

The House divided: Ayes 96, Noes 10.

Division No. 168] **[12.35 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benton, Joe
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Burnett, John
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dawson, Hilton
Dobbin, Jim
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Christopher
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McNamara, Kevin
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Mudie, George
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Paice, James
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowlands, Ted
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Shaw, Jonathan
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thompson, William
Todd, Mark
Trend, Michael
Wardle, Charles
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Edward Leigh and
Rev. Martin Smyth.

NOES

Atkins, Charlotte
Brand, Dr Peter
Dismore, Andrew
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fyfe, Maria
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Rendel, David
Sedgemore, Brian
Vis, Dr Rudi

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Joe Ashton and
Dr. Jenny Tonge.

Whereupon MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Question was not decided in the affirmative, because it was not supported by the majority prescribed by Standing Order No. 37 (Majority for closure or for proposal of Question).*

12.45 pm

Yvette Cooper: I was attempting to respond to questions about whether a doctor could still respect a patient's refusal to consent to treatment. The right to refuse treatment is embedded in the common law, whereas the Bill would be on the statute book. When there is common and statute law covering the same domain, the statute book takes precedence. The Bill refers to withdrawing or withholding treatment in all circumstances. It does not make exceptions in circumstances where a patient has refused treatment.

It is highly probable that more medical practitioners would fall within the Bill's provisions if new clause 13 were added, so we have serious concerns about it. It is unclear what the penalty would be under the new clause, as civil courts have only limited powers of imprisonment, and their usual way of punishing is by financial penalties such as awards of damages or fines. To have such a means of enforcement for the Bill would clearly be at odds with the intentions of the Bill's sponsor and promoters.

If the penalty were financial, the liability would fall on the NHS. New clause 15 is designed to move in the opposite direction. It asserts what was implicit in our previous discussions of the Bill, focusing on the criminal law of murder and manslaughter and how to apply that to doctors whose treatment results in a patient's death. Murder and manslaughter are triable only on indictment. The new clause makes that clearer because cases that are brought on indictment cannot be heard in the magistrates court. There can be no objection in principle to the fact that cases involving a large amount of factual and scientific information should be handled by a Crown court judge, presumably with a jury, rather than by a lay or stipendiary magistrate.

New clause 15 also reflects the current legal position that doctors charged with murder or manslaughter should be treated in exactly the same way as other persons charged with those crimes and tried on indictment in a Crown court before a judge and jury. Our view is that new clause 15 is a helpful clarification of the Bill, along the lines intended by the Bill's drafters, but that new clause 13 raises more problems than it solves.

New clause 17 raises an important issue for patients and their families who may be involved in proceedings under the Bill. Without the new clause, the principles of patient confidentiality would be in jeopardy. There are always sensitivities surrounding the disclosure of the identities of patients and parties in such proceedings, and we must ensure that the right balance is struck between the rights of the individuals involved and the public interest in an open system of justice. We have had an important debate in the House on those serious issues.

[Yvette Cooper]

The duty of confidence owed to patients is rightly regarded as fundamental by all health care practitioners. Only if patients have confidence that a health care practitioner will respect sensitive information about their life and health will they feel able to confide in that practitioner and feel secure in that relationship. There can be no doubt that proceedings brought under the Bill would concern the most sensitive types of health information. The confidential medical records about a patient's terminal illness—their condition in the last few hours or days of their lives—would be material to any case. Without new clause 17, those confidential medical records would be available to the media as well as to the courts. Under the Bill as it stands, the most confidential, private and intimate medical details could potentially be reported on the 6 o'clock news or in the newspapers.

Hon. Members have argued that similar circumstances can apply in cases of murder or manslaughter, and that is true. However, cases that arise under the Bill will always concern patients' medical circumstances and involve intimate details of their lives. That is an important consideration for the House when it decides whether to support new clause 17.

Mr. Miller: My hon. Friend speaks in terms of the patient, but in the context of prosecutions under the Bill, the patient would usually be dead. New clause 17 provides that no person should publish any material, but does my hon. Friend agree that the dead person's relatives might, in some circumstances, have the right to overrule that?

Yvette Cooper: The new clause raises complex questions that run both ways. It is not just a case of saying that it is a good thing and should be supported. My greatest concern is patient confidentiality, and although, as my hon. Friend points out, in most such cases the patient will have died, the General Medical Council takes the view that the ethical duty of confidence survives the patient.

We can all imagine a situation in which someone has chosen not to tell relatives or friends about their illness. For example, someone with HIV may choose not to tell relatives about his or her condition. Many patients feel that such information is highly sensitive, and that is their choice. If proceedings were brought under the Bill as it stands, the details of a patient's illness could be broadcast for the world to know, and we should be sensitive to the consequences that that could have for the patient's relatives.

Mr. Miller: My hon. Friend may have missed my point. In the awful case that was publicised last week, the relatives discovered what was written on the records. If the patient had died, surely it would have been legitimate for the family to have published that evidence.

Yvette Cooper: That is a material consideration for the House. I take my hon. Friend's point seriously, but it needs to be weighed against the other issues surrounding patient confidentiality. There is no simple answer, and new clause 17 does not resolve the issues satisfactorily.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Will the Minister outline the Government's attitude to new clause 17(1)(b)? That deals with

any defendant or witness in proceedings under this Act.

The Government's attitude to that provision would have great implications for cases involving medical professionals accused of other offences.

Yvette Cooper: The application of new clause 17 to other cases would raise considerable questions, and the Government cannot recommend supporting it. Although it raises important questions that should be considered and highlights troubling consequences of the Bill, we are worried about some of its broader effects.

New clause 17 is intended to deal with matters of privacy, and appears to be based on a clause in the Law Commission's draft Bill on mental incapacity, which grew out of anxiety about the need to protect the privacy of any person involved in proceedings in which it was alleged that decision-making capacity was lacking. That proposal would have achieved protection by making it an offence to publish identifying information about a person involved in incapacity proceedings. The new clause mentions a range of public media, such as television and radio, but it does not cover publication on the internet.

That is not surprising, given that the Law Commission prepared its draft Bill in 1995, when the internet was in its infancy and relatively few people had access to it in their homes. That has since changed, and the omission of the internet from the new clause is a clear loophole. However, the House will be aware of the extreme difficulty of regulating publications on the internet.

The Government consider that the new clauses raise important issues of clarification. Some are helpful, but others raise more problems than they resolve.

Mr. Trend: Will the Government continue to think about the new clauses? The 96 hon. Members who appeared in the Lobby with the Bill's proponents just now show how great is the groundswell in the country in support of the Bill. The considerable correspondence that Members of Parliament receive from constituents shows how anxious people are about their relationship with doctors and about what doctors, as professionals, do to them.

Will the Government continue to think about whether it is acceptable for doctors to kill patients by starvation? That is at the heart of the Bill.

Yvette Cooper: Certainly the Bill has raised important and weighty matters, and the Government will continue to consider them. The hon. Gentleman raises matters to do with the Bland case. They were subject to widespread public consultation relatively recently in connection with the paper entitled "Who Decides?". As a result of the strongly held views expressed in that consultation, the Government decided not to put the Bland judgment, which is in case law, on the statute book. These matters must be the subject of continued consideration, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government remain completely opposed to euthanasia.

1 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the Minister giving way on that point. She touched on the ambiguity that has developed. One of the Law Lords,

Lord Mustill, said that the decision had left the law morally and intellectually misshapen because it prohibits medical killing by an act but allows it by omission. I appreciate the Minister saying that the Government are still considering this. I hope that they will close the loophole without allowing the medical profession to move towards assisted suicide.

Yvette Cooper: I have tried to make it clear that judgments in such cases must and do depend on the best interests of the patient and that it is unlawful for doctors who have a duty of care to withdraw or withhold available treatment from a patient when it is in their best interests, if that patient has not already refused that treatment.

Dr. Harris: I have been listening to the Minister's comments with great interest and I agree with much of what she says. Does she accept that the Government's reluctance or delay in introducing legislation on these issues runs the risk—perhaps unintentionally—of laying the medical profession open to some pretty dire accusations in the tabloid press and by those campaigning about life issues, when without statute law the medical profession has to work according to its own guidelines, having regard to case law? However, the medical profession is left somewhat exposed and it is really for legislators to take responsibility for the legal position of doctors in respect of difficult end-of-life issues.

Yvette Cooper: The Government have made it clear that they accept existing case law on these issues and that, in respect of questions surrounding the Bland judgment, strong views are held on both sides. As a result, the Government have decided that it is not appropriate to legislate at this time.

Dr. Brand: Does the Minister not agree, however, that it would be far preferable if guidelines—even if we do not go as far as legislating—came from the Department of Health, having been discussed widely, rather than from the BMA or the RCN?

Yvette Cooper: It is important to recognise that, ultimately, we are dealing with clinical decisions. The BMA and the RCN have consulted widely on the guidelines. There is an important principle about clinical decisions, but I accept that we need to keep these issues under consideration as they are extremely important.

Mr. Gerrard: The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) has raised an important point. Those of us who are unhappy with the Bill do not necessarily believe that the law is in a satisfactory state, or that it is adequate to have guidelines from a medical association rather than clarity in the law. I hope that the Department of Health will continue to examine these issues as it is in everyone's interests that we achieve clarity in the law. Some of us have difficulty with the Bill because it fails to attain such clarity.

Yvette Cooper: Hon. Members are making important points. I can reassure them that I shall continue to consider the issues that have been raised.

Dr. Iddon: My hon. Friend said that the BMA had consulted widely on the guidelines. If she was referring to withholding or withdrawing life-prolonging medical treatment, I wonder whether she is aware that a substantial number of doctors do not feel that they have been adequately consulted. Is she also aware that the legality of those guidelines have been questioned during a debate in the Scottish Parliament?

Yvette Cooper: I said that the Government accept current case law. In addition to the guidelines, existing case law refers to omissions as well as acts. So it is not simply a matter of having only guidelines and an absence of legal position in this area.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): Can my hon. Friend give an indication of the time scale for the Government's consideration of amendments and additions to the law? When exactly might that happen? Can she give us a date?

Yvette Cooper: No, I cannot provide a time scale or any guidance on that question. All I can say is that important issues have been raised, the Government take them seriously, and we shall continue to consider them across Government, as we have done for many years.

Mr. Leigh: Does the Minister realise that the same point is now being made by those on both sides of the argument and both sides of the House? If the Government's view is what I believe it to be—that it is all right for a doctor to end a life by omission rather than commission—it is only fair that the Government stop hiding behind the Law Lords; that legislation is introduced and time allowed for it; and that the House is allowed a free vote. Only by proceeding on that democratic basis can we come to a proper conclusion.

Yvette Cooper: That is not a correct interpretation of the Government's position: we have made clear our opposition to euthanasia. We have also made it clear that current case law states that, if doctors, who have a duty of care, withdraw available treatment that is in the best interests of the patient, and that patient has not refused treatment, their action is unlawful. It is important that decisions in such circumstances are made in the best interests of the patient. From the beginning, one of the Government's concerns about the Bill is that it does not mention the best interests of the patient, or ensure that they are taken into account.

Charlotte Atkins: I should like some clarification in respect of new clause 10. Decisions of the sort that we are discussing are invariably taken in extremely distressing circumstances. The new clause would ensure that no prosecutions could be brought under the legislation without the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions first being given. My concern as a mother, and as a daughter whose mother has died, is that that could introduce tremendous delay in proceedings. The families of the patients involved could find their agony extended by the requirement for the DPP's consent. Legal cases could go on for months and extend the agony, not only of the immediate family, but of friends of the patient. That is my real concern about the new clause. It is fine—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is trying to make a speech, not an intervention.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend raises a serious question about new clause 10. The Government's view is

[Yvette Cooper]

that new clauses 10 and 11 are not appropriate at this time, while our review of the issues of consent raised by the Law Commission is continuing. Hon. Members should reflect on that when deciding whether to support the new clause.

The five new clauses raise important questions of clarification. Although they were intended to address some of the Bill's drafting flaws, which cause the Government great concern, they create as many problems as they were designed to resolve. The Government do not believe that any of the proposals satisfactorily answer our concern that the Bill would not achieve the aims set out for it by the hon. Member for Congleton.

Dr. Fox: To my deep regret, it now appears that the opponents of the Bill are likely to succeed in killing it. I therefore start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) on the brave and tenacious way in which she has raised the issue and given it the prominence it deserves. Euthanasia is immoral, unethical and unacceptable, even if patients have given their consent. I fully agree with the Minister for Public Health in that respect.

The new clauses were not necessary for the Bill to make progress, and many red herrings were introduced, specifically to take up the time of the House. Although I accept that that is a legitimate way of conducting business in this place, people outside will increasingly fail to understand when such tactics are employed on major issues of public importance.

Mr. Miller: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If red herrings had been introduced, they would have been out of order. Surely that is not a correct interpretation of this morning's proceedings?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Anything that the Chair had heard that was out of order would have been so ruled. Anything that has not been ruled out of order will automatically, therefore, have been in order.

Dr. Fox: I rest my case, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

On new clause 10, the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) spoke about the involvement of the Director of Public Prosecutions, and gave what I thought was rather a strange defence of the new clause. He said that the DPP should be responsible for prosecutions whose legislative territory was political, which he defined as involving matters on which there was great contention between political parties. That would bring the DPP into almost every area of legislative territory, and politicise the role.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman may have misunderstood my point. I was taking exception to new clause 11, because I believe that if an issue might be politically controversial, it should not be taken by the Attorney-General. That is not to say that the opposite is the case—that when a matter is not political, it must always be taken by the DPP. There are certain circumstances, which I outlined more fully in my speech, which support the argument for the DPP.

Dr. Fox: The difficulty in the hon. Gentleman's argument is the definition of the term "political". Such a difficult distinction was not helpful to the debate, and I am not sure that it was intended to be.

I was interested in what the Minister said, and I ask her to consider further some of the points raised on new clause 17. Much was made of the role of the press and the ability to prejudice a trial, whether on the basis of the Bill or otherwise, or to affect the reputation of a defendant or a witness. Much was said about what may happen to professional reputations as a result of such publicity.

I suggest to the Minister that professional reputations are not the only reputations that matter. Most of us would find it difficult to accept an artificial distinction between the protection of professional reputations in such a situation, and the protection of the reputations of members of the general public. If the Government are serious about considering the protection of defendants or witnesses, I hope that that point will be taken and the protection will apply to all members of the public equally, not disproportionately to some because they happen to be members of a particular profession.

Mr. Ashton: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify to the House whether he is replying on behalf of the official Opposition or expressing his own opinion?

Dr. Fox: In replying to the debate, I am largely expressing my own opinions, but I believe that they are shared by the vast majority of those who sit behind me. In fact, I can say with some certainty that they are shared by all those sitting around me now—*[Laughter.]*—all three of them.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) spoke about the fear of publicity on the part of professionals and witnesses if cases were reported in the tabloid newspapers. He said that the issues had been considered at the highest judicial level and by the medical profession at the highest level, so it was not for us—the House, presumably—to question them.

However, the role of Parliament is to question all such matters. It is our role to decide what we as a Parliament want; it is then for the judiciary to interpret and for others to follow the rules that we set. Doctors do not always know best, as the hon. Gentleman claimed.

Much has been said about fear. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) said, there are other fears to be considered—the fear felt by weak, elderly and vulnerable patients that decisions could be taken by members of the medical profession to withdraw treatment, which would result in death. Doctors do not always know best. Doctors do not all think in the same way, either. We need clear guidelines for the medical profession.

Parliament has a duty to consider and clarify such matters. We have failed to do that today, and it is now incumbent on the Government to act as a matter of urgency.

1.15 pm

Mr. Miller: I emphasise to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) and to the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton)—who is often my hon. Friend when we deal with matters that relate to the best county in the country—that I resent the notion that those who have participated in the debate mean to wreck the Bill. It is not my intention; I am firmly opposed to euthanasia. I tabled several amendments aimed at improving the Bill. I want to place that on record to remove ambiguity.

I tabled new clause 9 solely to probe the issues that we are considering in this important debate on new clauses 10 and 11 and related matters. The debate has emphasised my serious anxieties about the logic of following the course outlined in those new clauses. I am not a lawyer, and I did not understand the relevance of the Director of Public Prosecutions or the Attorney-General in the context of the Bill. The debate on new clause 13 shows the difficulty that non-lawyers experience when considering such matters as tort—with the greatest respect to my long-standing hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead). Tort is an immensely difficult concept.

After listening to the debate, I have concluded that—to show some unanimity—I agree with the view in the briefing that the hon. Member for Congleton gave to the Bill's supporters. It was also expressed by my hon. Friend the Minister: new clauses 10 and 11 are wrong in principle. There is therefore some agreement on that. I am worried about the DPP's involvement, especially in the context of new clause 10. I am anxious that a junior in the ranks would deal with the matters that we are considering, and that the new clause would not have the effect that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) sought.

I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon that, if new clause 11 were accepted, political decisions might be made because the Attorney-General is a political appointment. I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) to stress the need for checks and balances. I tried to provide those checks and balances in new clause 9 when I included a provision to consult with other authorities. Considering whether the authorities listed in that new clause were the right ones is irrelevant, because it was not selected.

I listened carefully to the debate about tort, but I do not know whether I am any more enlightened. I therefore take a neutral position on that.

We are considering the Bill against a background of rapidly changing medical realities. Several hon. Members know that I lost my sister and my father in a relatively short time. Both survived illnesses for a long time that they could not have survived only a few years ago. Although—thank goodness—I, my family and the medical practitioners were never confronted with horrendously difficult decisions, an increasing number of people will be put in that position as it becomes technically possible to keep people alive. We have had a number of debates about the evolving science of genetics, which will also require us to return to these extremely difficult problems.

I am not totally at odds with the moral principle behind the Bill, but I have difficulty with the way in which, in absolute terms, it would put doctors and carers in hospices and in homes for those with Alzheimer's in an immensely difficult position, particularly because it does not seem to take the rights of families into account.

Mr. Gerrard: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Gentleman began to consider whether to take an intervention, he made a passing reference to the new clause. However, he has drifted into a general discussion of the principles behind the Bill. He must speak specifically to the new clause.

Mr. Miller: I was about to do that in my next sentence, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There is bound to be a permanent collision between rapidly changing medical science and the enormous complexities of the law of the land as it operates in the context of death. The debate on new clauses 10, 11 and 13 is immensely valuable and, as of today, my view is that it would be inappropriate to incorporate any of them into the Bill. However, I am not certain whether I shall hold that view in five or 10 years time. We must revisit some of those principles.

Mr. Gerrard: My hon. Friend mentioned the difficult decisions faced not only by doctors but by hospice care workers. We must recognise that doctors are not the only ones covered by the Bill, particularly when we consider the position in which such people may find themselves. Does that not emphasise the need for the safeguards in new clauses 10 and 11, which would provide them with some protection against prosecution?

Mr. Miller: Having listened to the exchanges between hon. Members on both sides, I must say that I do not agree with my hon. Friend. However, I also do not agree with clause 1.

On new clause 15, the hon. Member for Congleton is right to say that it is axiomatic that the Crown court would be involved. She specifically says that the charge would be murder. As I understand the law, a murder charge must be dealt with in the Crown court. However, I have a difficulty: why on earth is the hon. Lady not prepared to accept the new clause, which clarifies the point in tight terms? That has polarised a difficult debate. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who is not in his place, recognised that we need to bring the various components of the debate—and those of us who, like the Government, oppose euthanasia in principle—closer together. Perhaps it would have been helpful had the hon. Lady done so.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: I assure the hon. Gentleman that both my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) and I believe that it is as unlawful for a doctor purposefully to kill a patient by an act of commission as it is for him to do so by an act of omission. We therefore believe that the law should be the same in both cases.

Mr. Miller: So the matter would be dealt with in the Crown court, de facto.

Mrs. Winterton: There would be no need for any additional provision. The arrangements would be exactly the same as those applying to unlawful killing or murder now—that is, those applying to acts of commission. Where was Dr. Shipman tried?

Mr. Miller: It is an outrage to compare Dr. Shipman with doctors working in the hospice movement and with people suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Mrs. Winterton: The hon. Gentleman has smeared what I said earlier. He knows perfectly well that the cases

[Mrs. Winterton]

to which he refers would not fall into the category covered by the Bill, because they are not purposeful. We have talked about double effect, and about the difference between purpose and intention. The hon. Gentleman knows that that is not the intention of the Bill.

Mr. Miller: With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady, let me say that, according to her briefing, prosecutions would take place not under the Bill but under the common-law offence of murder. She is, in fact, drawing an exact parallel between the terrible disgrace of Shipman, and doctors and carers working in a very difficult area. I know that she holds her views sincerely, but I ask her to think carefully about the way in which language is used in this debate.

Dr. Whitehead: Do not the stark terms in which the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) has set the choice make it necessary to consider the tabling of new clauses allowing the distinction between a straightforward murder prosecution and other forms of prosecution to be considered? Does my hon. Friend agree that it is wrong to suggest that everyone who proposes such an alternative is simply trying to do away with the Bill?

Mr. Miller: As I said earlier, it is almost a case of, "A plague on both your houses." I think that both extreme arguments are wrong. Following an act of murder, of course we must ensure that those responsible are tried in the proper place, but I am having difficulty with the new clauses in the context of clause 1. I shall not repeat the argument, because it has been dealt with at length by others with more expertise—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I promise the hon. Gentleman that he will not.

Mr. Miller: I meant that I would relieve the House by not repeating other Members' remarks, Mr. Deputy Speaker—not my own.

I fear that the difficult distinction between purpose and intention, and the new clauses that we are discussing alongside clause 1, will merely add to the confusion. I think we should improve clause 1, rather than adding these others.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Winterton) hit the nail on the head in her last intervention. One of my worries is the introduction of the "purpose rather than intent" amendment. In the context of trial on indictment, the position relating to trial for murder is very clear.

I ploughed a lonely furrow last night going through "Archbold" trying to find a definition of "purpose". There is none. The law of murder is founded on the concept of intent, and that is precisely and clearly defined in Archbold's "Criminal Pleading, Evidence and Practice", the bible of those working in criminal law. I fear that, by introducing a whole new concept, the hon. Lady is opening up the possibility of a whole new debate on the definition of murder. I do not necessarily disagree with her stated purpose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman had 54 minutes earlier; he cannot have another 54 now.

1.30 pm

Mr. Miller: I was following the logic of my hon. Friend's erudite argument. I intervened on my hon. Friend the Minister to make the point that the common ground between the two arguments is not to be found in new clauses 10, 11 and 13, but possibly in examining jointly the Law Commission's report on involuntary manslaughter. There may be some common ground there.

I honestly wish that we spent as much time as this on the 3,500 people who die on our roads every year. It is extraordinary that those lives that are lost by needless actions of others are not given the serious consideration that they deserve.

I shall now deal with new clause 17. There are three interested parties, if one excludes the various agencies of the state: the accused, the whistleblower and the family, all of whom have rights. I am not sure that the British Medical Association's medical ethics committee has always got it right—I notice that some eyebrows have been raised—when it has tried to protect the role of a doctor in cases that require difficult ethical decisions to be made.

Some time ago, I introduced a ten-minute Bill on that aspect as it relates to certain circumstances of death on the road. I fundamentally disagree with the BMA ethics committee on its approach to that issue, but that is not for today's debate.

However, it is right that, as the doctors' trade union, the BMA should put up a defence of the doctor, and there should be some mechanism whereby the accused person is protected from the publicity that may have occurred had the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) been pursued any further. As it was, the publicity surrounding his case was outrageous. There is a touch of irony in the fact that the extraordinarily long list of 153 items in the Law Commission paper on consents to prosecution includes the Isle of Wight Act 1980. Perhaps that is how the hon. Gentleman was pursued. The wide list ranges from local government issues through to genocide.

The accused must have rights in any prosecution. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) referred to the significant number of cases in the United States that have never been successfully prosecuted. One of the missing parts of the equation is adequate protection for whistleblowers. Such protection may enable a prosecution to succeed. That includes the need for a publicity protection clause.

Dr. Harris: I am not sure that I follow the hon. Gentleman's argument about the medical ethics committee, of which I am a member, as he knows. The role of defending doctors charged with misconduct or any other offence falls to protection agencies such as the Medical Defence Union and the Medical Protection Society. They are entirely different from the British Medical Association, which is the professional body. My understanding of the way in which the BMA's ethics committee works is that it has a separate function from that of giving professional advice to individual doctors who seek guidance about complaints. It is important to recognise the general role of the ethics committee in advising not only doctors but society in general.

Mr. Miller: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I recognise his expertise. Perhaps we can talk about my specific complaint outside the Chamber. It would be inappropriate to raise it here.

The category of person who needs to have the maximum protection in some publicity-based clause is the family. As I said in an intervention on the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), it is outrageous that, when deaths occur, the courts—it may be coroners courts or criminal courts—do not adequately take into account the rights of bereaved families either to speak in the various hearings, or to exercise some control over the publicity surrounding the death of their loved one.

I am extremely nervous about the fact that new clause 10 seems to concentrate almost entirely on the accused person and the rights surrounding that person. We need to look again at that principle. I am yet to be convinced by the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon that the new clause can stand up to examination.

As I have said, I do not believe that new clauses 10 and 11 can be incorporated into the Bill. New clause 15 should be. It is simply axiomatic and so not possible to ignore, as the hon. Member for Congleton suggests. I remain neutral on the tort issue, which is raised in new clause 13.

The new clause dealing with publicity is all right as far as it goes, but it is far from complete. Much more work needs to be done to separate the legitimate rights of the three categories of people: the accused, the whistleblower and the family.

I am grateful to have been called in what is a difficult debate.

Mr. Gerrard: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Miller: No. I will finish now.

I urge colleagues on both sides of the debate to try to use some of the arguments that have been advanced to bring the two sides together, rather than to allow them to polarise, as that would be immensely damaging.

Dr. Harris: I declare an interest, which I mentioned earlier: I am a member of the BMA medical ethics committee, although I do not speak directly on its behalf. However, much of what I say comes from its deliberations. I am also a former hospital doctor, so I have been involved in the care of critically ill patients in hospital not competent to give their consent or approval to decisions taken in their best interests by the clinical team, and of patients who fall potentially under the remit of the Bland judgment.

I do not intend to detain the House, as I should like the debate to make progress. I intend to abstain on procedural matters where I do not support the proposal. By registering an abstention, I count as one of the 100 required to have a closure. The hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) knows that I was one of the 96 in the Division on the closure motion earlier, although I have serious concerns about the Bill.

I have some sympathy with the motives behind new clauses 10 and 11, despite the reduction in the access to justice—the suggestion that private prosecutions should not be allowed to proceed without the approval of a Government Law Officer. My sympathy is based on an appreciation of the difficulties in understanding the relatives' role in end-of-life issues. If the new clauses were not accepted and the Bill were enacted, there could well be prosecutions by people concerned about how their relative had been treated, perhaps because they did not agree with the decision made, or felt left out of discussions on it. New clause 17 deals with publicity in such cases and, as the Minister said, the patient's right to confidentiality.

Relatives have less status than one might think in end-of-life issues. They may well not be consulted in such decisions, and they certainly do not have a veto over them. The seeming lack of consultation with relatives, and their inability to veto decisions and to dictate how treatment should proceed, often leads to complaints, and could, if a Bill such as this were passed, even lead to prosecutions. I think that that is the reasoning behind new clauses 10 and 11.

Another point, which I shall develop later, is how that issue relates to decisions to withhold treatments such as resuscitation, which would clearly be covered by the Bill. In such cases, if new clauses 10 and 11 were not accepted, relatives could well be concerned and make complaints. Additionally in those cases, without the provisions of new clause 17, patient confidentiality could also be threatened. However, I agree with the Minister that the provisions of new clause 17 raise wider issues and cannot be dealt with in a short debate.

Competent patients are those who are able to say which treatments they wish to accept or refuse, and relatives—even with the best of motives—cannot gainsay those wishes or even add their hap'orth on them. As far as possible, clinical care and medical treatment recognise the patient's autonomy in saying which treatments they wish to accept or refuse. In cases involving competent patients, in law and in ethics, there is no role for relatives to intervene in the doctor-patient relationship.

Charlotte Atkins: I should like some clarification on precisely that point. The hon. Gentleman has mentioned cases involving competent adults, but where does competence lie in cases involving children? I think that all hon. Members would agree that, very often, children suffering from terminal illness are old for their years. In such cases, although they may be minors, they clearly have a distinct view on how their treatment should proceed and on whether it should proceed.

Dr. Harris: The hon. Lady raises an interesting issue, and I should be interested in discussing it with her outside the Chamber. I have promised that my remarks would be short and to the point of the new clauses. It would be difficult to address the issue now, but I refer her to the BMA's guidelines, which deal not only with the end-of-life issue but with contraception and consent to treatment generally.

As I said, relatives have no role in cases involving competent patients. I think that it would be unethical to allow the wishes of a competent and adult patient to be overruled by those of another party. I think that the hon. Member for Congleton realises the concern that would be caused by allowing such a practice. Even in planning treatment for patients who are not competent to give consent—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Although the hon. Gentleman has made a glancing reference to two of the new clauses in this group, I cannot make the same

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

connection between the new clauses and his subsequent remarks. I do not understand how his comments relate to whether the

"prior consent of the Director of Public Prosecution"

or the Attorney-General should be required.

1.45 pm

Dr. Harris: I apologise for not making that clear, Mr. Deputy Speaker. One of the reasons behind new clauses 10 and 11 is to ensure that private prosecutions cannot be brought without the consent of a Government Law Officer with regard to all the facts of the case, partly because there is a feeling—reflected in some of the newspaper coverage of recent issues—that many relatives feel left out and hurt by decisions that have been made on end-of-life issues. Without the protection of a senior Government Law Officer judging the case and deciding whether a prosecution is worth while, there could be several attempts to prosecute on decisions to withhold treatment, based on a false premise that, even for incompetent patients, relatives should have a say in, or even a veto over, clinical decisions. I was coming on to say, if I am allowed, why that is not the case. It is important that there should be a bar on a possible series of prosecutions of doctors by relatives who have been left out of the process.

New clause 17 relates to publicity about such cases and how a patient's right to confidentiality can be preserved while actions around end-of-life issues are taking place. We have heard examples from the Minister and others about patients with HIV who do not necessarily want their relatives to know the reasons for their condition. If there was not a bar on prosecutions or the reporting of actions by relatives in ignorance of the clinical conditions—such a bar being the advice and consent of a senior Government Law Officer—we would be in peril of threatening patient confidentiality.

It is important to set out the justification for new clauses 10 and 11 regarding relatives' rights in providing consent—or not—for patients without consent. Section 18.3 of the BMA guidelines say that for an incompetent patient

> The views of people close to an adult patient carry no legal weight. . . . Regardless of their lack of legal authority, the views of those close to an adult patient can be of considerable value in helping clarify what the patient would have considered to be beneficial.

We are talking about what the patient's views would be, not those of the relatives, who may be seeking to bring a prosecution later, if new clauses 10 and 11 do not prevent them.

The guidelines go on to say:

> It is important to be clear, however, that the information sought—

that is, from the relatives—

> relates to any views the patient expressed when competent, which might help to ascertain what he or she would have wanted in these circumstances, as opposed to what those consulted would like for the patient or what they would want for themselves if they were in the same situation.

Government Law Officers have a role in representing the views of incompetent patients, as in the Bland case. It is not the relatives to whom one turns to ascertain the best interests of the patient, but Government Law Officers. Should the Bill become law, there will be a role for provisions along the lines of new clauses 10 and 11 to ensure that the right people put forward the best interests of the patient.

Mr. Gerrard: Further on in section 18.3, the BMA guidelines say that

> relatives' perceptions of the patient's likely views often differ substantially from the patient's own wishes

and that

> relatives tend to have a more negative impression of the condition.

Does not that emphasise the need for protection for the doctor? If relatives take a different view, particularly if it is a more negative view—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That intervention has nothing specifically to do with the new clauses. The hon. Gentleman is following an argument being made by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), but I do not have the greatest confidence that that argument is wholly relevant to the new clauses. The hon. Gentleman is hanging a Second Reading issue on to the text of the new clauses. I shall not allow that to go on for much longer.

Dr. Harris: I apologise if I have not have made clear the relevance, or if I have been unable to do so. I will not continue along that line.

If the Bill becomes law, we will not wish to see a rash of prosecutions in cases where that is not what the patient wanted. Even if a currently incompetent patient has—in a valid advance directive, for example—expressed a wish to see their suffering ended, or not to receive treatment in specific cases, it would be of major concern to society if all the details of that patient's treatment were brought before the court because prosecutions were allowed without the veto or the consent of a senior Government Law Officer. That is the wording of new clauses 10 and 11, and that is the relevance to the debate of the issue of relatives' competence.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): With regard to the new clauses, is not the hon. Gentleman really saying that doctors know best and that no one should question their judgment? Is it not a fact about British justice that a number of successful prosecutions have been brought by private individuals which have corrected great injustices? Why should this matter be different?

Dr. Harris: That is why I have problems with new clauses 10 and 11. I would rather not see the Bill become law than restrict the rights to private prosecution. However, time and again, we see cases in which treatment has been withdrawn from a patient—perhaps with the patient's consent—where the relatives have strongly objected. A case was mentioned in the House of Lords recently where a patient was consulted on whether or not they wished to have resuscitation withheld should they suffer a cardiac arrest, and the relatives had their disagreement raised in Parliament.

If the Bill becomes law, without the opinion of a senior Government Law Officer being sought, such a person will be able to prosecute when clearly it is the right of a competent patient to decide whether they want to end their

days on a ventilator—having been resuscitated, in a relatively futile way, for the last few days or weeks of life—or whether they wish to die with dignity.

Mr. Pickles: Surely that is a matter of evidence or defence, and not a reason why a prosecution should fall before it starts.

Dr. Harris: If a competent patient wishes not to have treatment—such as cardio-pulmonary resuscitation in the event of a cardiac arrest—and if the doctors pursue that line of approach in their clinical care, they should not be exposed to the dangers of prosecution from relatives or other parties.

The more interesting case is that of an incompetent patient—someone who may have had a serious stroke, for example—for whom there is little or no chance of any meaningful recovery, and little chance of any unmeaningful clinical recovery. In those cases, decisions are made by doctors, acting in the best interests of the patient, that it would be inappropriate when the patient suffers a cardiac arrest in hospital to be jumped on by a team of three doctors and have their chest opened for manual cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. Because of the speed at which these things happen, relatives may be concerned that they were not consulted and that not every action was taken to preserve the physical continuation of the heart function in the patient.

Without some sort of protection, we will see a rash of cases where relatives have not understood the situation; have been left out; or have not been kept up to date because of the fast-moving nature of events seek through legal or other means to question the views of the doctors.

I believe that I have drawn the attention of the House to issues relating to relatives and decisions taken in respect of the care of patients. The Bill will create difficulties for the clinical team, not just the doctors, in understanding whether they are likely to be prosecuted for acting in the best interests of an incompetent patient or for following the instructions of a competent patient.

Mr. Healey: New clause 15 was not covered in Committee and has barely been touched on today. My aim in tabling it was to be constructive. It is not designed, in the words of the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), to wreck the Bill. It is an attempt to make a badly drafted Bill a little better. I am in the unusual position of speaking after, not before, the Bill's promoter, the Minister and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman.

The new clause is necessary. Throughout our proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee, and in her briefings, the hon. Lady has asserted that the offence that she wants to create is murder, but it is not specified as such. My hon. Friend the Minister confirmed the point by saying that the new clause may not address the Government's deeper concerns about the Bill but is a helpful clarification along the lines intended by the Bill's drafters.

The hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend), as he did in Committee, probed positively and constructively to try to improve his and the House's understanding of what lies behind the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) said that those of us who are unhappy with the Bill are not happy with the law as it stands. I hope that both will welcome my hon. Friend the Minister's confirmation that the Government will continue to consider the issues, which are extremely difficult and distressing for the patients, families and staff involved.

New clause 15 is designed to ensure that any trial under the Bill must be heard in the Crown court, not the magistrates court. There is a gap in the Bill, or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) described it, a lacuna. He is a lawyer; I am not. I am grateful for his support.

The Bill creates a new offence, but its degree is not defined, no penalty is specified and there is no confirmation of how the judicial system should deal with it. The importance of specifying trial in a Crown court is based on the nature of the matters that the courts will have to consider and on the nature of the offence that the Bill creates. The matters that the House considers will form part of the court's consideration at whatever level a case reaches in the judicial system and that is directly relevant to the judgment we make on whether the Bill should specify how such a case should be handled. Those matters are also directly relevant to our judgment on whether such cases should be heard only in a Crown court, as provided in new clause 15.

The other factor in the House's assessment of the need for new clause 15 is the clarity of the Bill as it stands, and what it will be left to the courts to interpret in trying to deal with any case that may be brought under the legislation.

Mr. Dismore: The point that needs to be emphasised is that a trial for murder would almost certainly be heard by a High Court judge, who would be experienced in interpreting law, especially of a vague nature as is the case with this Bill. However, if the trial were to take place anywhere else, the only legal advice would be from the clerk to the court in the magistrates court or from the stipendiary magistrate—people who, while very competent, do not possess that specific high degree of skill.

Mr. Healey: My hon. Friend makes a clear and valuable point. The purpose behind new clause 15 is to clarify such matters, which are at present unspecified in the Bill. The clarity of the Bill's provisions is relevant to the judgment about whether it should specify how cases should be dealt with and at what level.

I wish to convince the hon. Member for Congleton and my hon. Friends that the Bill is too open to interpretation and too complex to be dealt with at any other level in the judicial system than trial by jury in the Crown court. It is also too important to be left unspecified—

2 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has now repeated himself four times. If he cannot get to the substance of his argument, I shall invoke the Standing Orders to cause him to desist from speaking altogether. He must speak to the substance of his new clause, not indulge in endless repetition.

Mr. Healey: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Bill is short and deceptively simple. At the core of what the courts will have to consider—and, therefore, the reason

[Mr. Healey]

for ensuring that cases must be decided by jury at a Crown court level—is the provision about the "purpose or purposes" of withdrawing or withholding medical treatment. That will be the principal focus of decisions about whether an action is lawful and of any proceedings. It therefore bears heavily on judgments about whether we should specify how cases should be handled.

Mr. Ashton: In my earlier intervention, I mentioned the 85 cases that have been taken to court in America, where they have a more vigorous approach to suing for compensation than we do. Every single case has been thrown out by a jury. My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the difficulty of preparing a case for prosecution and the need to prove it beyond any reasonable doubt, not on the balance of probabilities. My hon. Friend is making a valid point—and I am sure he is in order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—that juries in such cases do not convict, just as the jury refused to convict Dr. Moore when he was accused of murder in similar circumstances.

Mr. Healey: I do not wish to try to pre-empt any judgments that a court might make. My concern is to ensure that any case is properly dealt with under the Bill. The Crown court is the lowest level at which such matters should be dealt with. The new clause would give weight to one of the purposes expressed on the face of the Bill, and deal with the interpretive challenge presented by the way that the Bill is drafted. I shall elaborate on those two contentions.

Any court considering a case brought under the Bill as it stands would have to consider what was in the minds of the medics. That is the principal question, and its answer would be set against the patient's best interests or declared wishes. Those wishes might be contemporaneous with the treatment and expressed in patient consent, or they might be expressed in a statement made in advance of treatment. The Bill contains no provisions to the effect that the measure would apply unless the patient did not want treatment or sustenance, or unless such treatment or sustenance were not in the patient's best interest, or—as the hon. Member for Congleton said—unless the treatment were futile.

The Bill's lack of such qualifications means that, inevitably, the purposes of those involved would command more attention and be given greater weight than considerations that currently appear in case law or in codes of guidance such as that issued by the British Medical Association. The hon. Member for Congleton has argued that matters such as advance directives are beyond the scope of the Bill, and that qualifications such as I have suggested are not required on the face of the Bill.

However, I fear that the hon. Lady is wrong. A court would have to take a view on whether the attribution or assertion of purposes overrode all other such established factors for determining what actions were, or were not, lawful. That is the measure of the challenge that would face a court, and it is the relevant factor to be taken into account in specifying or confirming how actions taken under the Bill must be handled in the judicial system.

The hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) gave distressing personal testimony about what happened to his first daughter. The answer to the question posed to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), on whom the hon. Gentleman intervened, is that the action taken with regard to that little girl would be unlawful under the Bill as it is drafted.

The second matter to which I want to turn is the complexity of the interpretive challenge. Although such challenges arise in connection with other parts of the Bill, I shall concentrate again on the question of hastening the end of a person's life.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot go into a debate about the issues in the Bill itself. His argument should be confined to the point at the heart of his new clause, and to that alone. That is the point about which is the appropriate court to deal with the matters covered by the Bill.

Mr. Healey: The point at the heart of the new clause is that the interpretive challenges posed by the Bill as it stands can be dealt with only at a specified and appropriate level—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has made that clear six times. I understand that assertion, and it is entirely relevant in support of the new clause. However, I can see no connection in his other remarks with the main purpose, which he has just repeated,

Mr. Healey: In attempting to assess the interpretive challenge facing the courts, we are entitled to look to the explanations given by the hon. Member for Congleton to assist with the problem. She has maintained consistently that an offence under the Bill would be akin to murder. However, I believe that the mens rea would be different.

In Standing Committee on 16 February, the hon. Lady stated:

> If I had used the word "intention" in clause 1, it could arguably have been claimed that we wanted to outlaw anything that would have the side effect or double effect of hastening or causing death. That would, of course, be an intolerable restriction on medical care."

She continued:

> Everyone understands what "purpose" means and is. I have said at length that it is equivalent to "intent" . . .

So even in her presentation of the Bill, the hon. Lady created a lack of clarity and a confusion that will have to be resolved by the courts.

The hon. Lady explained that she used the word "purpose" because

> it has not been spoiled with lawyer's fictions about foreseen effects.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 16 February 2000; c. 41-42.]

The Bill inserts the word "purpose" into the legal system for the first time. However, I suspect that it will not be long before it is subject to the same scrutiny and questions about interpretation as "intention". My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, in his deep research through "Archbold" has been unable to find a legal definition of the word "purpose". If the Bill reaches the statute book unamended, it will have a legal definition before long.

I have tried to explain why the interpretive challenge for the courts seems unavoidable. Purpose is a new term and it will inevitably be tested. The declarations and directions from the hon. Member for Congleton are contradictory, so it will be for the courts to settle the

matter. It should not be open to consideration by magistrates, as that would not be the appropriate level in our judicial system.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) said that she does not want to use the word "intent" because it has been jumbled up by lawyers. One issue that the Crown court would have to determine on indictment is the definition in the new clause. In respect of intent, "Archbold" says that

> a judge . . . should avoid any elaboration or paraphrase of what is meant by intent, and leave it to the jury's good sense to decide whether the accused acted with the necessary intent.

So as far as "Archbold" is concerned, it is clearly a matter for the jury.

Mr. Healey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his helpful intervention.

I shall not repeat the problems that the courts will have to resolve as a result of the conflicting definitions suggested by the hon. Member for Congleton. There is also a contradiction in her description of the application of the Bill. That too will be for the courts to clear up.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) referred to the case of Tony Bland and asked the hon. Member for Congleton:

> Is she suggesting that the doctors' purpose was to cause death, or does she agree that the doctors' purpose was to cease treatment, allowing death to occur . . . ?

The hon. Lady replied:

> My answer is the obvious one, which has been repeated many times. If food and fluids are withdrawn, death is inevitable . . . Therefore, the doctors' purpose in that case—

purpose, not intention—

> was to bring to an end the life of that patient in PVS by the withdrawal of food and fluids . . . I know that he—

the hon. Member for Isle of Wight—

> does not agree with me, but that is the simple principle laid down in the Bill.

To be fair to the hon. Lady, she also said

> If medical treatment is withdrawn, death is not inevitable.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 16 February 2000; c. 14.]

The hon. Lady tried to draw a distinction between medical treatment and sustenance, but the Bill as drafted treats them in exactly the same way. That is a contradiction in applications that the courts will have to resolve. That is part of the reason for new clause 15, which would confirm how cases brought under the legislation will be dealt with.

Another problem is that for certain patients the withdrawal of medical treatment will just as inevitably lead to death. In Committee, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight asked the hon. Lady what would happen in the case of a severely malformed child when withholding or withdrawing medical treatment would lead to death, just as in Tony Bland's case the withdrawal of food or sustenance meant that death was inevitable. However, in response to that similar—indeed, identical—point, the hon. Lady answered:

> When doctors face such cases, they ask whether treatment would be futile or whether it would be beneficial or burdensome to the patient. If treatment is futile and would not improve the patient's life, doctors would be able to withdraw treatment because the purpose involved would not be to end life.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee C*, 16 February 2000; c. 29.]

Whatever the honesty and integrity of the hon. Lady's intent, that is not how the Bill as currently drafted would work. That confusion and contradiction in its application would have to be a matter for the courts to consider.

2.15 pm

Although "purpose" as a legal term might not yet have been, to paraphrase the hon. Lady, mucked about with by lawyers, it will be soon after the Bill reaches the statute book. There is confusion and contradiction within the definitions, and confusion and concern about the application—both matters for the courts to clear up and both clearly beyond the competence of magistrates courts. That is why we must ensure that those issues can only be dealt with and referred to the Crown court by trial.

My second point relates to the nature and seriousness of the offence that justifies my having tabled new clause 15. Despite the descriptions of the nature of the offence in the briefings and statements supplied by the hon. Member for Congleton, it is not specified in the Bill, despite the fact that it is highly relevant to the courts in determining how to deal with it. Supporters of the Bill have said that the offence the Bill creates is akin to murder and, on 15 March, the hon. Lady sent me and other hon. Members a briefing on the Bill that makes that clear. Under the heading, "The Need for the Bill" it states:

> A doctor who intentionally hastens a patient's death by an act commits murder. Until 1993, it was equally unlawful for a doctor intentionally to hasten a patient's death by omitting medical treatment.

Later, the briefing states:

> The one and only aim of the Bill is to restore the law's moral and intellectual shape by restoring its prohibition on purposeful killing by the withholding or withdrawing of medical treatment or tube-feeding.

New clause 15 is intended to provide clarification and confirmation. It would make explicit that which, to date, has been implicit and stated in places other than on the face of the Bill, and which has focused on the criminal law and the offences of murder and manslaughter. Murder and manslaughter are crimes that can be tried only on indictment—in other words, they cannot be tried in a magistrates court. My hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health made it clear that cases in which there is a large amount of scientific and factual information are appropriately handled by a judge and jury, and that is what new clause 15 would provide.

I am not a supporter of the Bill, but I hope that the hon. Member for Congleton regards new clause 15 as helpful and recognises that it is necessary. I was disappointed by her statement that she is unable to accept the new clause and I hope that she will reflect on my remarks. If she is not prepared to change her attitude to the new clause, I shall press it to a vote and ask hon. Members on both sides of the House to support it.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I wish to make only a few remarks, which are occasioned by the intervention of the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) and by some of the remarks made by other hon. Members.

I start by declaring a second-hand interest in the matter, in that my wife is a general practitioner and, like all other doctors, comes across the sort of cases that are being discussed in relation to the Bill. It is important to make that point, as it gives me, I hope, some insight into the

[Mr. David Rendel]

sort of problems faced by the medical profession, in particular the increasing litigiousness of our society, and the fact that more and more people are inclined to blame the medical profession for things that are out of its control, and the difficulties that that brings.

At least two of the new clauses in the group give a measure of extra protection to the medical profession from people who may be behaving somewhat irrationally, at a time that is inevitably one of enormous stress and emotion for the relatives of the deceased person or the person who may be about to die, and indeed for the patient.

Anyone who has seen a loved one go through the process of dying will accept that, at such times, people can become somewhat irrational in their reaction to what is happening. I was struck by the intervention of the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar, who I am glad to see is returning to his place. I fully accept his point that private prosecutions have sometimes led to justice being done, when otherwise it might not have been done, but I suggest to him and to the House that there are also occasions on which a private prosecution may lead to some injustice being done, if it is initiated in an irrational manner, as a result of someone being particularly emotionally involved in a case.

That is the danger of not providing some degree of separate, objective, unemotional reference by which to determine whether a prosecution should go ahead. I hope that the new clauses would provide a more objective view of the circumstances.

It is, of course, right that no doctor is above the law and that no doctor can be immune from prosecution. Sadly, as we have seen in the past few months, some doctors behave in a way that is clearly not in the best interests of their patients and may sometimes illegally bring about their deaths for reasons that are entirely unacceptable. It is also right that many members of the medical profession are acting in the best way they can, sometimes in challenging circumstances, to succour and help their patients at a time that is difficult for them.

My concern is whether it is in the best public interest as a whole that doctors who are making difficult decisions are liable to be subject to prosecution, possibly as a result of a relative taking a rather emotional view of the situation.

As we all know, in end-of-life situations, relatives may begin to have guilt feelings, possibly as a result of their feelings about the person who is dying, or as a result of long-standing issues that have not been properly brought out. They may be feeling guilty about the process of death itself. It is a perfectly natural and human reaction to have some feelings of guilt when we remain alive and someone whom we love very much comes to the end of his or her life. That feeling of guilt sometimes leads people to react in a way that is not rational, and to try to transfer their guilt to someone else. In those circumstances, which are different from those that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar mentioned, relatives are perhaps most likely to bring an irrational private prosecution. As the hon. Gentleman said, such an action, far from leading to greater justice or removing injustice, it is likely to lead to injustice,

I hope that hon. Members will accept that the medical profession should not be put under extra strain. Being a doctor is becoming increasingly traumatic because of the public's growing litigiousness. It is not in our best interests that that should continue. Sadly, it is leading gradually to more defensive medicine, to doctors being increasingly careful about taking extreme measures, which are perhaps not truly in the patient's best interests because of their fear that they might otherwise be hauled before the courts.

Doctors might not believe that they are likely to be found guilty—they may be sure in their own minds that the way in which they plan to act is proper and in the best interests of the patient. However, even if they are sure of their innocence, it is traumatic to fear being hauled before the courts—apart from which a case that is brought on an irrational basis is time wasting and expensive.

It cannot be in the public's best interests for such time wasting to occur or for our doctors to resort increasingly often to defensive medicine simply because of the emotional circumstances in which they have to act. We are considering critical, difficult moral decisions. It is not in our best interests to put extra pressure on the medical profession so that its members are hauled before the courts, not for reasons that are rational but because of extreme emotions.

We should accept either new clause 10 or new clause 11 today. I suspect that new clause 10 is preferable, mainly for the reasons that the Minister outlined. I am delighted that we are having this debate today, because we are considering an important issue. However, I hope that the Government will take on board that it is time for clear legislation. We should not leave the matter to the medical profession because that puts intolerable pressure on its members.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Clearly, we shall not finish our debate on the new clauses today. I want simply to make a few points which I believe are important.

I wish I could say that the debate has clarified matters, but it has not. We have progressed on new clauses 10 and 11 because there is some preference for new clause 10 for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Minister outlined.

I have received many letters from my constituents, but they tend not to tackle the detailed matters that we are considering. They state that we should use the guiding principle of respect and compassion when considering the Bill.

My constituents want to be sure that justice is done. They will express anxiety that new clause 17 might lead to justice being hidden, rather than being seen to be done. Yet if we bring the guiding principles of respect and compassion to bear, we can understand why new clause 17 has been tabled.

We read in the press recently that people are anxious about doctors making decisions without considering what patients want. We should consider what patients want.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 5 May.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

PUBLIC HOUSE NAMES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 5 May.

SCOTTISH ADJACENT WATERS BOUNDARIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 21 July.

CONTROL OF HEDGEROWS IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 12 May.

ZOO LICENSING (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 5 May.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is not in the best spirit of the House to seek a Second Reading on the day immediately following the printing of a Bill.

WILD MAMMALS (HUNTING WITH DOGS) BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

MARINE WILDLIFE PROTECTION BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

RETAIL PACKAGING RECYCLING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 21 July.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER (AMENDMENT) BILL [*LORDS*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 21 July.

HARE COURSING BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

ROAD TRAFFIC BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 5 May.

GOVERNMENT POWERS (LIMITATIONS) BILL

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Not moved.

COMMITTEES

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Mr. Richard Page be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Mr. Edward Leigh be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

Social Services (Southend)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

2.32 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): Social services in Southend are in crisis. That view is not mine but that of the all-party delegation that met the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), on 10 January. I was asked to join the delegation, so many of the opinions that I shall share with the Minister for Public Health are not mine, but those of the Labour and Liberal-controlled council. The Minister of State's heart belongs to Southend. He comes from the town and was educated there. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) must not hold a discussion in the middle of a debate.

Mr. Amess: The Minister of State listened courteously to everything that was said in the meeting and I want to share with the House the details and what has happened since. It is no exaggeration to say that a growing number of Southend residents depend on what the Minister for Public Health is able to say today. Unfortunately, the situation has grown somewhat worse since our meeting on 10 January.

Before the meeting, I was supplied with a detailed briefing which I shall summarise. The council budgets to spend overall at the standard spending assessment level. The political complexion of Essex county council has changed and is still in doubt. People often say that things are not as they wish when they take over, and Southend would argue that things were not in a good way when it became a unitary authority. The council says that it is budgeting to spend at SSA level on education in 2000-01. It recognises the budgetary pressures in respect of social services and affords priority to the service by spending above the SSA. I think most Members know how the SSA is calculated, but many of us would argue with the way in which it is calculated. The Government, and the Minister of State specifically, invited representations on that.

The difference between Southend's SSA and projected spending on social services in 2000-01 is approximately £1.5 million, which is a considerable amount. Many people think that Southend is a wealthy area with no social problems; if only that were so. The Government obviously realise that it is not, because they supported the town's bid for objective 2 status. Southend has a growing transient population from London. As a Londoner myself, I do not want to be too heavy-handed with London authorities, but many of their challenging problems seem to be arriving in Southend. Southend argues that it is not being given the resources that would enable it to cope with those problems.

As the Minister will know, having presumably been briefed, the main pressures on our budget relate to learning disabilities and looked-after children. Both show a high level of spending above the SSA. In respect of learning disabilities, an increasing number of service users are qualifying for care as a result of increased life expectancy, ageing carers who are becoming unable to cope, and a perceived high proportion of service users in Southend compared with the average.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of children need to be looked after. As the Minister will know, we have no home in Southend to look after them. I have no easy answer to the problems caused by children who will not go to school. Often they are the children of single parents, who say that they cannot control them. We have no secure residential accommodation for such children.

We are working with South Essex health authority, but we feel that, because we are under-resourced, we cannot chip in and help with its problems. The budget disaggregation that led to the redistribution of funds to deal with mental illness left the borough with a further problem: schemes that it inherited did not match the grant allocated by the Department of Health, and there was a shortfall of £52,000.

A number of cuts have been made. During the 18 years of Conservative Government, Labour and Liberal Members of Parliament used to criticise cuts, so I do not think it dishonest of me to share with the House the brief that I have received from the Labour-Liberal council telling me all about the cuts that it has made. Three of our six residential homes have been closed, which has saved £1 million, and a fourth has become a rehabilitation and respite care unit. The children's and young persons' division has been restructured, which has saved £300,000.

There has also been a large increase in home care charges. I have received many letters about that—local residents are facing extra charges for meals on wheels and all sorts of other services. The introduction of a new charging policy, extending charges to day care and other areas in 1999-2000, will apparently raise about £250,000; management has been restructured, and that will save £50,000. The situation is already serious, and, having analysed the projections for next year I believe that they will lead to further cuts.

I had an exchange in the House with the Minister's colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes). She obviously does not know Southend as well as I do, and depended on briefing. I do not criticise those who briefed her, but it was slightly disingenuous of her to criticise the council for the underspend of £31,000. When the Minister—who, I know, will not have time to reply to me fully today—looks at the figures, she will see that the money was ring-fenced and the £31,000 could not be used. In any event, it was a drop in the ocean of the overall shortfall.

The Under-Secretary said that the Conservatives could not even be bothered to present an alternative budget, and Labour Members cheered. It was not like that, but one of the problems with being in opposition is that the Government always get the last word, so it is difficult to come off best.

For the following year, the council will have to authorise a number of cost-reduction measures. I am worried that it is keeping a number of posts vacant. The director of social services will have a vacancy factor of £118,000. That is all well and good, but local residents will be very concerned if there are cuts in any key areas.

In its best value review, the local authority identified various savings: there will be independent sector efficiency savings of £89,500; the mental health grant and

independence grant will be redistributed, which will contribute a further £57,500; under a review of social services establishment, a senior practitioner will not be replaced, saving £16,000; changes to the reception area of Queensway house and Royce house will save £25,000; equipment store downgrading will save £20,000; a training scheme downgrading will save £24,000, and so it goes on. The headlines will refer to cuts. I do not incite people to write letters, but I would be failing in my duty if I did not represent the views of the local groups that write to me, so umpteen letters will find their way to the Minister's office and to her ministerial colleagues.

Some of the letters that I have received about what is happening on the ground are very worrying. On 31 January, social services introduced a new charging policy for non-residential community care. Instead of a flat rate of £10.85, it was decided to introduce a banded system. Following that new policy, I have had many letters from elderly and disabled constituents whom the council—and perhaps the Government—feels should be able to pay for their non-residential community care. That fear is being stoked up because pensioners are getting only a 75p a week increase.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) is well aware of the terrible problem in Southend. We had a ballot on whether the primary care group should become a primary care trust. Only 31 per cent. of doctors supported it, and doctors cannot be silenced, as we found. The Conservative Government did not try to do that, but we found consultants and doctors extremely challenging. Community care charges will mean a 400 per cent. increase in the weekly bills of local residents. Those people skimped and scraped to put together what they thought would be enough to look after themselves in later life, but it is proving very difficult.

At Southend hospital, 64 beds are blocked, 28 with social services cases. Local home owners are concerned because there is no longer any money for nursing care—it is all residential. I am advised that, as a result of Mrs. Coughlan's case—I know that the Government are appealing against it—any charging would be illegal. A new standard weekly charge of £485.50 equates to £69.36 per day. Private owners are expected to maintain their residents in the private sector on £36 a day. That is ridiculous. They have to maintain higher standards and higher staffing levels on half the amount that the council claims. It is a very difficult situation.

I have had a letter from Southend Rotary Club, which says how upset it is that it seems that the council will not continue to fund Crossroads. I have also had a letter from the treasurer of the Huntington's Disease Association. It is worth quoting. It says that it is disappointed with

> the treatment we are receiving from Southend Borough Council. First funding for Lulworth Court—

which is on the sea front and where residents who are disabled from all over the area enjoyed respite care—

> was withdrawn causing its closure.

It complains about home care charges and says:

> Crossroads have lost the contract they had in favour of a nursing agency which is hardly the same thing.
>
> Crossroads gave a unique service which will now be lost.

I have had many other letters from people complaining about that.

I have also had a long letter from Southend Mencap, which has tremendous problems with day-centre charges. It says:

> We now have the evidence that people in the same Day Centres, receiving the same benefits and receiving the same training programmes, are to be charged by the Southend system but not by the Essex system.

How crazy are things when such nonsense can be allowed? Southend Mencap says:

> We are aware that Government guidance gives local authorities discretion to make charges, with an implied threat that if they fail to do so their SSA could be affected adversely. This is at the root of the problem.

I know that some hon. Members may groan about it, but I have had some detailed representations about the situation concerning asylum seekers in Southend. Some hon. Members might say that some constituents are prejudiced, but anyone who knows Southend knows that it is a very caring, Christian area in which to live. Every week, churches raise money for Mozambique and so on, but the council feels that it has an impossible situation to cope with.

Earlier in the year, the council said that it had 447 "nationally assisted" asylum seekers. First, the number in total was between 700 and 1,000. Now it looks as if it is well over 2,000. The Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), is visiting Southend on 9 March, I believe.

The local authority's report goes through all the pressures, not just on schools and on policing but on social services in particular. I know that the Minister will not have time today to reply in detail to the matter, but the local authority is concerned that the grant will not be honoured in total. It has had word that the national budget is overcommitted and that grant claims may not be met in full.

There we are. I say it again. It is not the hon. Member for Southend, West saying that social services in Southend are in crisis—we all have better things to do with our time than to keep moaning about things—but the people whom I represent. The plea is coming in particular from councillors in Southend.

I hope that the Minister, if she is not able in the short time available to go into huge detail about the problems, will at least speak to her colleagues. Please, please, please will she do all in her power to help my constituents? I represent an ageing population. It is ironic, considering the matters that we have just debated. Life is very precious. All local residents, regardless of their age, are entitled to decent treatment, particularly from social services in Southend.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on securing the debate. I undertake to pass on many of the detailed points that I will not be able to answer in the time available to the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), whom I know he has met before to discuss the issue.

There are substantial numbers of men, women and children in local communities throughout the country for whom the social services provided by local councils are extremely important. The care and support services provided to those people are many and varied, ranging from meals on wheels for elderly people living at home

[Yvette Cooper]

to help at home for people suffering from physical ill health and residential care for vulnerable children who may be in danger at home.

Social services are also significant because of the £10 billion or so of public expenditure incurred annually in providing them. Bearing in mind the demands placed on such services, it is important that we—both local and central Government—obtain maximum value for every pound spent on them. The Government's best value policy aims to ensure that that happens.

The hon. Member for Southend, West has raised some specific concerns about the funding of social services by Southend council, and I shall address as many of them as time allows. I know that he was a member of a delegation from Southend that met my hon. Friend the Minister of State on 10 January to discuss those concerns. First, however, I shall place the funding of Southend's services in context by saying a few words about social services funding generally and the funding that the Government have made available for improving social services.

The Government made the funding of social services a priority in the comprehensive spending review that we undertook two years ago and for which the settlement was announced in July 1998. We guaranteed that for the first time, the funds available nationally would increase in the following three years, so that local councils could plan ahead knowing what resources would be available. In the three years covered by that spending review, social services will receive an additional £2.8 billion, which means an average of more than 3 per cent. above inflation each year. That demonstrates in a very real way the Government's commitment to improving those services.

Our White Paper "Modernising Social Services", published in November 1998, set out what we intend to achieve with those additional resources in partnership with local government. Both the Government and local councils are keen to ensure that the funds provide real benefits for vulnerable people who depend on social services. To that end, last year, we introduced three new grants to promote independence in the community, and another new grant to improve the quality of children's services. We also provided substantial increases in the mental health grant and the training grant, to both of which we attach great importance. Taken together, that is a substantial injection of cash for change, directed through grants and carefully monitored to improve performance.

We are now in the second year covered by the comprehensive spending review settlement, and local councils will receive an additional £492 million for social services, which is an increase of 5.6 per cent. in cash terms, and 3.1 per cent. in real terms.

Those substantial additional resources have enabled us to increase the personal social services standard spending assessments by 5.1 per cent; the quality protects grant for children's services by £45 million, which is an increase of almost 60 per cent; the mental health grant by £13 million; and the training grant by £3.5 million. At the same time, we have maintained the overall funding that we provided last year for the three grants for promoting independence. All local councils, including Southend, are benefiting from those significant increases in resources.

As for the funds available specifically to Southend for social services, Southend's standard spending assessment increased by 10 per cent. last year, and by a further 5.7 per cent. this year, to £34.3 million—well above the national average increase and substantially above inflation. Additionally, there are substantial increases this year in the special and specific grants that we are making available. Last year, they totalled £1.7 million. This year they are increasing by 12 per cent. to about £2 million. I should also emphasise that the increases in provision have been reflected in actual spending by the local council, which increased its personal social services spending by 10.5 per cent. last year, and will increase it by a further 4 per cent. this year.

Overall, therefore, the Government have increased the resources available to Southend for social services by £5.1 million—16.5 per cent—over the past two years, which is a substantial increase well above inflation.

Southend is a new unitary council that took on social services responsibilities when it came into being two years ago. During that time it has made significant progress overall, modernising through the use of the new grants. Sharpening the focus and impact of the grants has been part of the new performance appraisal arrangements that the Government introduced last year. Like others, the council has been supported and evaluated by social services inspectors and NHS regional officials.

As I speak, a review is being conducted by a joint team from the social services inspectorate and the Audit Commission to establish how well the council and its partners are discharging their social services responsibilities for the benefit of users and carers, and whether they are doing so in the most effective way. Under this Government, such reviews have become important vehicles for stimulating necessary changes. Monitoring, inspection and review in a five-year cycle are the elements of our new system for assessing social service performance.

The House will be pleased to know that this first year's appraisal of Southend council's performance shows that real progress has been evidenced in plans submitted to the Department of Health. That progress covers the quality protects grant for children, which is a quality-directed initiative; specific partnership grant schemes for adults promoting independence and ensuring appropriate discharge from hospital; and the relief of carers in the new carers grant, the aim of which is to allow them more breaks.

In work with children, there has been progress on a number of fronts. Southend submitted a strong second-year quality protects management action plan in January. Fifty of its quality protects targets have been met, despite difficulties in the recruitment of social workers. Each child now has a named social worker and 100 per cent. of cases are reviewed, which is an improvement on last year's performance. More than 20 extra carers have been recruited, and a review of all children for whom adoption is planned has been completed. That ties in with a new consortium that Southend has joined, which has increased the numbers being adopted.

The council has taken the Government's emphasis on its parenting responsibilities seriously. There are new forums for the education and health of looked-after children, and close liaison with the education department. The department has arranged for the secondment of a public health doctor, who has produced a blueprint for how health and social services can co-operate better to give looked-after children more attention. The social

services inspectorate has noted that as an example of good practice. Work with adults has produced similar significant progress in a number of areas.

From the performance appraisal it is clear, as the hon. Gentleman said, that Southend has many people with learning disabilities receiving services. The Government are currently giving serious consideration to services for people with learning disabilities. The range and quality of services available to people with learning disabilities, their families and carers can vary widely from one part of the country to another. We are developing a new learning disability strategy. Our aim is to eliminate inconsistencies in service delivery across the country and to ensure that all services reach the level of the best.

Our strategy is to consider a wide range of issues, including services for people with learning disabilities who are living in the community. Work on the strategy is being taken forward in six small groups, each looking at issues related to particular topics—children, health, supporting independence, family carers, work force planning and training, and building partnerships.

Service users are contributing to the work, and the strategy is due to be published by the end of the year. The NHS and local authorities have been asked to prepare joint investment plans for people with learning disabilities from April 2001. That will provide a practical means for implementing the learning disability strategy and an excellent opportunity for the NHS and local authorities to consider how the flexibility in the Health Act 1999 can best be used to improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities.

The hon. Gentleman has expressed concerns about the funding of Southend social services. I am sure that he appreciates the effort being made by the council to focus spending in the positive way that the Government have laid down. The publication of performance indicators by the Department last October has indicated how the council may use its resources more effectively, but it is clear from the performance appraisal that it has engaged positively with the efficiency agenda and made progress throughout this year.

When the hon. Member for Southend, West and his delegation met the Minister of State, my hon. Friend said that he would consider allocating additional mental health funds from the underspend on last year's mental health grant if the authority could make a suitable case. I understand that, because of recruitment difficulties, the authority did not submit a case for additional funds and informed us of an underspend totalling £31,000 from the mental health partnership fund, which was the figure referred to by the Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes).

The hon. Member for Southend, West referred to asylum seekers. Last month, the Department made a payment of £49,000 to Southend-on-Sea, fully reimbursing the council for the costs that it had incurred in dealing with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

The evidence is that in its first two years Southend has made every effort to make proper use of the additional funds made available and the support and guidance provided by the Government. The council has difficult choices to make, but it is not in crisis. It is making strides in delivering cost-effective services, which we are actively monitoring, and my Department will continue to help the council to make the best use of its increasing resources.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 17 April 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Meteorological Office

1. **Jane Griffiths** (Reading, East): If he will make a statement on the future of the Meteorological Office. [117879]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): As a trading fund combining the best of the public and private sectors, the Meteorological Office will continue to build on its success as a world-leading meteorological service. Its aim is to enable individuals, society and enterprises everywhere to make the most of the weather and the natural environment.

Jane Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. When Ministers consider the future location of the Met Office, which I understand will have to relocate from its current site, could they consider the economy of the entire country and the fact that the south-east is immensely congested? That makes it difficult to locate such an office in the Reading area as has been suggested.

Dr. Moonie: To move forward successfully, the Met Office must harness the benefits that go with a modern building and its associated infrastructure. Redevelopment or refurbishment of the main Bracknell site would not be cost-effective. No decisions on the final location have yet been taken, but a move to Shinfield park, near Reading, would have attractions in developing the Met Office's long-standing relations with the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts. Other locations that meet the Met Office's future strategic and business needs will be considered. An application for outline planning approval for Shinfield park will be submitted to the local planning authority at the end of May 2000, and that will address a range of environmental issues, including traffic management.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): The Minister will be aware that the Met Office is based in my constituency, not in Reading, East. Does he accept that the people of Bracknell greatly appreciate having the Met Office in Bracknell, and that the town has had a long association with it? The people of Bracknell are appalled to learn from the hon. Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths)—this morning, on local radio and now in the House—that they should all lose their jobs and that the office should relocate to Liverpool. Is that official Labour party policy?

Dr. Moonie: As I said in my initial answer, our current intention is to consider the Shinfield park site as the office's preferred option. Eighty per cent. of the Met Office's staff are mobile grades. Although most of them would be expected to relocate to the new site, it is likely that, if it were at Shinfield park, most would commute.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): The Met Office's latest annual report states:

> relationships with the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency are key to future service developments.

Can the Minister say whether the remote sensing branch and the meterological research flight, which are currently at Farnborough, will find themselves partners of core DERA or privatised new DERA under the new arrangements sneaked out today in a written parliamentary answer to a compliant Labour Member, who is not even in the Chamber for Defence Questions?

Dr. Moonie: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that that matter has already been considered in the consultation document.

Aircraft Carriers

3. **Ms Linda Perham** (Ilford, North): What progress has been made with plans to procure replacements for the current Invincible class of aircraft carriers. [117881]

11. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): What progress has been made in the Government's plans to procure replacements for the Invincible class of aircraft carriers. [117889]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Competitive contracts, each worth about £30 million, for the future aircraft carrier assessment phase were awarded, on 23 November 1999, to BAE Systems and Thomson-CSF Naval Combat Systems. The assessment phase will investigate options for carrier design and, by 2003, will deliver proposals for the manufacture of the two vessels. The carriers, which will be built in the United Kingdom at a likely cost of some £2 billion, are scheduled to enter service in 2012 and 2015 respectively.

Ms Perham: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and welcome his assurance that the aircraft carriers will be built in the United Kingdom. Does he agree that that is excellent news not only for the shipbuilding industry, but for the Royal Navy, with which I am very proud to be on secondment this year under the armed forces parliamentary scheme? Does he agree that the two design contracts give the lie to Opposition Front Benchers who continue to insist that the carriers will never be built?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her observations, and I can certainly confirm that the carriers

will be built in the United Kingdom, at a cost currently estimated at £2 billion. That should demonstrate to Opposition Members that the Government have a consistent and determined approach to ensuring that the Royal Navy has the equipment that it requires not only for today, but for the long-term future.

Mrs. Gilroy: I, too, thank my right hon. Friend for that response, which will be very welcome news for my constituents in Plymouth, Sutton. When does he expect the Royal Navy to start considering basing options for the new carriers?

Mr. Hoon: I would be delighted to help my hon. Friend in her determined efforts to secure re-election at the general election, whenever that may come, but, unfortunately, I am not in a position to do that. However, in response to her specific question, as soon as the carriers are built, we shall be in a position to determine where they should be based.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the aircraft of choice to be the carriers' main armament is the American joint strike fighter, into which millions of pounds of British money have already gone? Would he like to tell the House how the prospects for developing the joint strike fighter for the carrier programme will be affected by the likely privatisation of Boscombe Down as part of DERA?

Mr. Hoon: The joint strike fighter is certainly a strong candidate for the future airborne carrier system, but the Government will also consider various other options. It is important in this procurement that we consider at the same time both the type of aircraft carrier that the country will require and the nature of the aircraft that will fly from it. Too often, we have considered those two issues separately. That has not been a sensible way of resolving our requirements for aircraft carriers or aircraft.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the Secretary of State agree that if we are to be confident about building the new carriers, we must be satisfied that there will be adequate shipbuilding capacity in the United Kingdom? In view of the unholy mess that has been caused on the Clyde with the roll on/roll off ferries, what confidence can the House and the country have that there will still be adequate shipbuilding capacity to allow us to build the carriers, which are fundamental to the expeditionary strategy embraced in the strategic defence review?

Mr. Hoon: A number of yards throughout the country have the potential to participate in the construction of the carriers, although which yard is awarded the eventual contracts will depend in large part on the nature of the final design that is selected. When I first arrived in the House, I was always impressed by the right hon. and learned Gentleman's determination to approach issues fairly and reasonably. I regret that he appears to have become a victim of the press release tendency. If he had given a few moments' thought to some of his recent comments on the legal implications of the order in Glasgow and applied his fine legal intellect to the problem, he would not have produced such half-baked material lately.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Does he accept that, while there has recently been an increase of 2.5 million jobs in the economy as a whole, some regions, particularly those dependent on older manufacturing industries, have a huge jobs deficit? Does he agree that it would be in the best long-term interests of taxpayers for the Government, when they think about placing the orders, to pay some attention to reviving the economy in certain areas?

Mr. Hoon: I agree with my right hon. Friend to the extent that, under World Trade Organisation and European Union rules, we can direct where the work on our warship programme should be completed. However, as he will know, for purely commercial contracts, we are not free to direct where work should be undertaken.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the difficulties of British shipbuilding. It will be some time before the ships are ordered. Can the Secretary of State give an assurance that we will have the capacity? Will Harland and Wolff be involved? Has the shipyard responded to possible orders from the Ministry of Defence?

Mr. Hoon: I said earlier that there were a number of shipyards in the United Kingdom capable of constructing the carriers. Harland and Wolff in Belfast is certainly one of them.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The Secretary of State keeps saying that there are a number of shipyards in the country capable of building major naval vessels. How many shipyards are there going to be in this country once he has let all six roll on/roll off ferry contracts to foreign yards? Does he believe that metal bashing is no longer a national asset and simply not care?

Mr. Hoon: Before the hon. Gentleman bursts a blood vessel, he should bear in mind the fact that in January 1997, the then Conservative Government specified a requirement for two ships in an advertisement in the *Official Journal* of the European Community, stating that those ships were of a commercial character and would be subject to the European Union rules on public procurement. They also told potential contractors that they would decide the matter according to value for money, having regard to price, quality and delivery. Rather like the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), the hon. Gentleman should check his facts before issuing tendentious press releases.

RAF (Kosovo)

4. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What assessment he has made of the RAF's performance during the Kosovo campaign. [117882]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The Royal Air Force made a highly effective and widely respected contribution to the Kosovo campaign, helping NATO to achieve its objectives.

Lessons are of course being learned, and they will be highlighted in a report that we intend to publish next month.

Mr. Kidney: Is my hon. Friend aware that this year's annual presentation by the RAF to Members of both Houses of Parliament was exceptionally successful? One of the reasons was the vivid report of the air campaign over Kosovo, informed by video footage. Some of the audience may have been fascinated by the accuracy of the targeting of RAF weapons, but my heart was in my mouth listening to the cool and professional voices of the pilots and navigators describing the ground-to-air missiles coming towards them and the life-saving evasive action that they had to take. Bearing that in mind, will my hon. Friend assure the House that, when the review has considered the needs of the brave members of the RAF for improved protection of their lives when they carry out dangerous operations on our behalf, any such needs will be met?

Mr. Spellar: Yes, I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the RAF presentation team. I forbear drawing any comparison between that and the equally good presentation from the Royal Navy. The House has been given a very good indication of the enormous quality of the young men and women who serve us.

On the substance of the presentation and the work undertaken in flight, I was equally impressed. We are considering how to upgrade defensive mechanisms. That is why we are upgrading the Tornados from GR1 to GR4. Of course, the front line and the sharp end are important, but so is the logistics tail that supports those young men and women, not least at the base and depot in Stafford.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): What steps are being taken to overcome the obvious shortcomings of what was in any event a formidably fought campaign by the Royal Air Force, including the inability to conduct precision bombing in bad weather? Is the Minister satisfied with secure communications between aircraft?

Mr. Spellar: We are certainly examining how to extend global positioning capabilities for bombing. Of course, laser designation has problems in cloud and we are considering ways in which that could be improved. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to communications, but he should also draw attention to communications between our Air Force and other allied air forces and the ways in which we could enhance it. Those are all expensive items. We have to get the balance right. That is what the report on lessons learned will address, and we look forward to discussing it after its publication next month.

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): What action is the Ministry of Defence taking on the location and destruction of unexploded bombs in Kosovo, especially cluster bombs?

Mr. Spellar: Allied forces have made a considerable effort to remove unexploded ordnance, including cluster bombs. We had the very unfortunate experience of two members of the Gurkha Regiment dying in that effort. The first priority was to try to ensure that schools could open in Kosovo. We are also working with other agencies to undertake that effort on a more sustained basis, as we do in many areas throughout the world.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Minister talks about capability, but does not much of what he said hinge on the capability of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency? That brings us to what the Government plan to do about DERA. Is not the reality that we have learned today that, if the Government are about to spend £100 million on what they call their heartland vote, that is worth a statement, but if they are about to dispose of a massively important asset such as DERA, that is worthy of no statement whatever?

The Minister must answer two questions about DERA. First, is not the reality that, in accordance with his earlier answers, the Ministry of Defence will now lose much of the impartial advice that it would have received through the overlap with private industry in assessing the RAF's capability? Secondly, in their attempt to provide a golden blocking share to ensure that DERA will not face problems with its future prospects, the Government are likely to run head on into the EU, which has already expressed the opinion that such golden shares are not acceptable.

Mr. Spellar: I knew that the hon. Gentleman could not fail to get the EU in somewhere. This is a less than appropriate question on which to raise his point, but I accept that if the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) had turned up to muster, the hon. Gentleman could have come in at a more appropriate point.

The announcement is about a consultative document which will, therefore, be available for full public consultation. A statement will be made after that consultation when full and proper decisions have been taken. The hon. Gentleman is right, however, to draw attention to the imperative need for the Ministry of Defence to receive impartial advice from a proper, appropriate Government agency. That is why parts of the agency will be retained within full public control to provide that advice, while other elements will be able to take advantage of commercial expertise and a necessary injection of private capital.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Minister says that we should contrive some other method to ask questions, but do not the Government have a responsibility to bring an important measure such as their proposals for DERA to the House for discussion and questioning? He mentioned consultation and perhaps he can now tell us—there is no word on it in the consultation document—what the US Government have said about the issue, given their unique relationship with us over DERA. Have not the US Government made it clear that nothing should proceed, especially in the case of Boscombe Down, that risks jeopardising that relationship, until they have had another chance to discuss that arrangement? In failing to mention

the US Government, do not the Government show more and more that they know the price of everything and the value of nothing?

Mr. Spellar: The old jokes are the best.

We value our strategic relationship with the US through NATO and the technical relationship through DERA with the US and with several other laboratories around the world. Of course, the US is far and away the most significant of those, and that is why Ministers and officials have been in extensive discussion with the Administration in the US regarding the proposals on DERA. We wish to value, maintain and enhance those relationships between our Government laboratories and Government scientific facilities in the US. That is why we have evolved the proposals so that they take account of concerns that were rightly and properly expressed to us. Now those proposals will go out for public consultation. That is the right approach, and when we come to make decisions, we will have a full statement on what the Government propose. We have now made the initial proposals and we look forward to receiving representations from all areas, including from the Opposition.

RAF Museum, Hendon

6. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement about the future development plans for the RAF museum, Hendon. [117884]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): The RAF museum trustees' plans for development at Hendon are dependent on an imminent stage 2 bid for heritage lottery funds. The Ministry of Defence has provided funds in support of that bid and we have given a commitment to provide further funds should the bid be successful.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that assurance of support. However, the scheme is also dependent on the plans for the former RAF East camp site, which are presently with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Will he use his best endeavours to ensure that DETR gets on with making a decision on that planning issue, because without it the full scheme cannot go ahead?

Dr. Moonie: My Department is committed to the success of the RAF museum and to its development plans. The question of the related East camp planning inquiry is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. While I cannot comment on a planning inquiry, I am sure that my right hon. Friend will have noted my hon. Friend's remarks.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): Has the Minister any plans to donate funds to enable more Tornados to be stored at the RAF museum? I know that there is a shortage of pilots, and that might help.

Dr. Moonie: That was a very helpful question. I have not received any inquiries about the possibility of putting more Tornados there, but I am sure that any such inquiry would be given serious consideration.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

7. **Miss Julie Kirkbride** (Bromsgrove): What recent reports he has received concerning the development of weapons of mass destruction by *(a)* Iraq and *(b)* Yugoslavia; and if he will make a statement. [117885]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Since inspectors from the United Nations Special Commission were expelled from Iraq in December 1998, we have continued to monitor the situation there. We remain concerned that the development of weapons of mass destruction programmes is taking place. We therefore strongly support the early deployment of the United Nation's monitoring verification and inspection commission in Iraq.

The Government receive declarations and reports about a number of other countries, including the former republic of Yugoslavia, concerning weapons of mass destruction, and continue to monitor developments.

Miss Kirkbride: I am sure that the House will agree that what the Minister has just described is extremely worrying for the prospects of nuclear proliferation. What is the Department's view of the anti-ballistic missile system being developed by the United States? If the Department considers that to be a good idea, why is he not working with the United States to provide that defence umbrella for the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hoon: We are in regular dialogue with the United States about that but, unless and until the United States decides to employ the system, there is little that I can say to the hon. Lady to resolve her concerns. There is not much point in trying to anticipate the United States' decision on that matter.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Is not the Secretary of State avoiding the question? He must have a view, one way or the other. For example, we discovered recently that Yugoslavia has 48 kg of enriched uranium. We also know, from an institute in the United States, that Iraq needs only enriched uranium to make a nuclear device. The two countries have started talking to each other about just that. Is not it time for the Government to get off the fence and take a view, for or against the proposal? What are the Government saying to the US Government?

Mr. Hoon: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman carefully on this question, and he has an interesting approach to international negotiations. He appears to agree to requests before they are made. He rolls over before he is asked to do so: in those circumstances, it is difficult to see how he could defend Britain's best interests. In my experience, even performing poodles in circuses usually require an order before they do anything.

New Zealand

8. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): What co-operation there is between his Department and the Defence Ministry in New Zealand on matters of common interest. [117886]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Our defence relations with New Zealand remain very good, and are based on strong and traditional links between the armed forces of our two countries. Our main ties are through the five power defence arrangements, but British and New Zealand forces have also worked together in UN operations, including in Iraq and Bosnia, and in East Timor and the Gulf.

These strong ties are reinforced by a number of exchange programmes between the UK and New Zealand, the provision of training for members of the New Zealand armed forces, visits by Royal Navy ships, and, where the opportunity arises, exercises—both bilaterally and as part of FPDA. The naval task group deployment to the far east this year will include an FPDA exercise off Malaysia which will involve elements of the New Zealand navy and air force. It is planned that elements of the task group will visit Wellington.

Mr. Mackinlay: Has the Minister noticed reports that the Prime Minister and Defence Minister of New Zealand's very radical Labour Government are proposing to announce formally on ANZAC day posthumous pardons for the New Zealand soldiers executed in world war one? I wholly applaud that action, but it is unilateral. Should not the British Government revisit this matter, given that, in strict legal and constitutional terms, the power to pardon all soldiers in the British Empire forces still resides in London? Would not it be silly and grossly unfair to the other 300-odd executed soldiers if the New Zealanders were to be pardoned, and they were not? Will my hon. Friend have a chat with the other Commonwealth countries involved, and revisit with an open mind this important and popular issue?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to an issue that is very strongly felt, not just by himself but by others Members of the House and many others in the country. He will be aware that my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), made an effective and moving statement to the House on 24 July 1998. He went through the very difficult arguments about the first world war executions. Subsequent to that announcement, a number of decisions have been made locally about adding to war memorials the names of some of those who were executed. There are differing views on that, but I think that it has been very well handled by all those concerned.

Having reread the statement by my predecessor, I find it immensely persuasive. I think, therefore, that we should stick to that policy, unless there are overwhelming reasons for not doing so.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On the Minister's first answer, does he agree that we should pay tribute to the New Zealand defence forces, particularly for their deployment in East Timor which, I believe, was their biggest since our involvement in Korea? Is he aware that New Zealand forces worked alongside the Royal Marines, Canadian forces and Australian forces? Does he agree that when English-speaking nations get together, their common interest and heritage, as well as a common language, mean that they work well for the future safety of all the world?

Mr. Spellar: I pay considerable tribute to those who were involved in many combined operations, not only with the countries mentioned by the hon. Gentleman but with the countries of NATO. He will be aware that English is also the operational language of NATO.

Falklands

9. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): If he will estimate the cost of garrisoning the Falklands *(a)* since the restoration of democratic Government in Argentina and *(b)* for the last 12 months for which figures are available. [117887]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Our best estimate is that some £2,263 million was spent on the Falklands garrison between 1983 and 1999. That includes the cost of constructing the Mount Pleasant airfield. In 1998-99, expenditure on the Falklands garrison came to £69 million.

Mr. Prentice: Two billion pounds is a huge amount of money, and so is £69 million a year. Can that be justified, given the restoration of democratic government in Argentina? In these days of overstretch, is there a greater perceived threat to the Falklands than there is, for example, to Gibraltar from Spain, which also has a territorial claim?

Mr. Spellar: We very much welcome the restoration and development of democracy in Argentina. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently visited Argentina, and had very constructive discussions with Ministers there. He also visited the Falkland Islands and, again, had very useful discussions there, reinforcing our policy that the Falkland Islands are British and that sovereignty over the islands is not for negotiation. Accordingly, it is right that we should maintain a military presence as long as Argentina claims sovereignty over the islands.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Can the Minister guarantee that the air bridge will be maintained at its current frequency when discussing the cost of garrisoning the Falklands?

Mr. Spellar: We always look at sustainability, and how to undertake that most cost-effectively. The mechanism by which we do that is to consider and discuss it with the armed forces. The key thing is to ensure that we maintain an effective and viable presence and, indeed, that that is quite clear to the Argentines. We learned from a previous Government, who dropped their guard and perhaps gave the wrong signals to the Argentines.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Does my hon. Friend agree that garrison costs could be lower if he had available to him a heavy lift aircraft such as the A400M?

Can he say when there will be a decision? Is it not best to go for the short-term Antonov solution rather than the ruinously expensive C-17?

Mr. Spellar: I think we shall have to institute a competition on how my right hon. Friend will manage to raise the subject of the A400M in any possible Defence questions. Once again, I congratulate him on his ingenuity. As he is aware, Ministers are considering the matter closely and hope to make an announcement shortly.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

10. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What is his policy on giving up all British nuclear weapons while other countries still retain some weapons of mass destruction. [117888]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): As we made clear in the strategic defence review, our minimum nuclear deterrent will remain a necessary element of our security while large nuclear arsenals and risks of proliferation remain.

Dr. Lewis: Does the Secretary of State realise that the reason for my concern is the quiet and subtle shift on that matter in the previous two Labour election manifestos? In 1992, the Labour manifesto categorically stated that until "elimination" of the

> world's stock of nuclear weapons . . . is achieved, Labour will retain Britain's nuclear capability.

Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that?

However, the 1997 manifesto stated only:

> When satisfied with verified progress towards our goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons, we will ensure that British nuclear weapons are included in multilateral negotiations.

Will the right hon. Gentleman categorically rule out, once and for all, any question that a situation will arise in which Britain would give up its entire stock of nuclear weapons while other countries retained some weapons of mass destruction?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments on the process of drafting a Labour manifesto. It is the first time in the manifesto's history that it has been described as "quiet and subtle". I assure him that we stand by the commitments set out in the manifesto on which we were elected and that we shall take fully into account the existence of nuclear arsenals elsewhere. That would certainly be the most important factor that we would consider before any change in our own strategic security position.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Surely we should all welcome the ratification of the START 2 treaty as a major breakthrough. Despite the concerns that many of us may have about some of Mr. Putin's other policies—especially in Chechnya—does my right hon. Friend agree that further multilateral arms negotiations are a real prize that we must pursue?

Mr. Hoon: I agree with my hon. Friend. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will make precisely that point to the Russian president-elect when he meets Mr. Putin today.

De-mining

12. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What steps his Department is taking to assist those involved in humanitarian de-mining. [117890]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The Government were among the first to sign and ratify the Ottawa convention and we are committed to humanitarian de-mining and the clearing of land mines. The Ministry of Defence works closely with other Whitehall Departments and non-governmental organisations. Ministry of Defence personnel provide technical expertise, management and specialist skills to support mine action programmes worldwide. In the UK, the mine information and training centre at Minley remains the focal point for information on de-mining and mines awareness advice. The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency is examining ways in which mine detecting technologies would be suitable for humanitarian de-mining. In addition, we have gifted surplus military equipment to NGOs for use in their humanitarian mine clearance operations.

Helen Jones: May I thank my hon. Friend for that reply? I especially welcome his comments on DERA. Does he agree that there is a huge potential for exploiting the technological expertise of that agency to produce low-cost de-mining equipment that can be used for humanitarian purposes? Will he tell the House when he expects to be able to make an announcement on whether the agency has been successful in obtaining further money for such research from the Government's capital modernisation fund?

Mr. Spellar: I shall certainly write to my hon. Friend on that matter. I join her in paying tribute to some of the innovative work being undertaken by DERA. However, we must consider how we put that work into practice; the donations that we have made to several NGOs enable them to work actively, with local labour, on de-mining in many areas that have been particularly affected to the enormous detriment of the population and local economies.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The United States Government take the view, which I share, that land mines have a part to play in certain special circumstances, such as the denying of land to potential aggressors in the Korean peninsula. May I congratulate the Government on supporting the American position by allowing land mines to be stored in ships off the territorial waters of Diego Garcia?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman rightly draws attention to the position of one of our allies. In fact, other allied countries take that view. It is not a view that we share, and we are campaigning and working with those Governments to try to spread the Ottawa convention. As has been graphically illustrated on television and in newspapers, in many areas land mines have an enormous effect on the populations that are left behind, often when conflict is finished, and—as I said in my previous response—a considerable effect on their economy and their ability to regenerate their society and become part

of a modern society once again. We are working hard on that, and on persuading other countries of the correctness of this position.

Weinberg Estate, Germany

14. **Sir David Madel** (South-West Bedfordshire): What is his Department's policy in relation to the future development of the Weinberg housing estate near Fallingbostel, Germany; and if he will make a statement. [117893]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): The Weinberg estate comprises 474 flats, of which the British forces lease 392. On expiry of two of the current leases at the end of 2001, it is planned to hand back 158 properties to the respective landlords to reflect a reduced housing requirement. For the remaining 234 properties, my officials are actively involved in negotiation with both the landlords and relevant German authorities with a view to effecting improvements both to the overall condition of the estate and to individual properties.

Sir David Madel: Does that answer mean that part of the estate will be knocked down and rebuilt, possibly with a private finance initiative arrangement with a German construction company? Can the Minister give a bit more detail on the time scale for making the very necessary improvements to those flats which house service men's families?

Dr. Moonie: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I share his concern about the quality of our accommodation; I made it known during a debate last week that that is one of our highest priorities for improvement. With that in mind, I have to say that all the service families accommodation on the Weinberg estate is categorised as below the ideal standard set by the Department. Upgrades to the properties already effected include double glazing for all, the provision of new kitchens for 222 flats, new bathrooms for 258 flats and replacement hot water and heating systems for the same number. Four blocks of flats have been reclad externally; the remainder are to be completed within two years.

The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that a survey of residents on the estate showed that 80 per cent. of those families surveyed would prefer to remain there than to move to other service families accommodation. On the specific point that the hon. Gentleman made, as far as I am aware, there are no plans for such a scheme.

Atomic Weapons (Safety)

15. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What reduction will take place in the number of safety-related jobs at AWE Aldermaston and AWE Burghfield during the 12 months from 1 April. [117894]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): In the event that the contractor's proposals lead to a reduction in the number of safety-related jobs, the contractor will need the separate approval of the independent regulators—the nuclear installations inspectorate and the Environment Agency—and of the Ministry of Defence compliance office. Neither the Ministry of Defence nor either of the agencies will give its approval if it judges that the changes will have an adverse impact on safety standards.

Mr. Rendel: The Secretary of State does not appear to know how safety will be managed over the next year at AWE. What on earth were the Government doing handing over AWE to two firms like BNFL and Lockheed Martin, which have such appalling safety records, if he does not even know how they will manage safety?

Mr. Hoon: I have just made it clear in my answer to the hon. Gentleman that we monitor safety standards, and that any change in safety standards or in the number of personnel will have to be considered carefully both by the Department and by the two agencies in the light of its effect on safety. Before the initial bids for managing AWE were considered, any bidder had to satisfy safety criteria involving 28 separate components, 20 of which were regarded as crucial to the process. Not only did the successful contractor meet those criteria, but theirs was the best of the three bids in that area.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Does the hon. Lady want to ask a question now?

Miss McIntosh: No.

Aircraft Carriers

17. **Ms Dari Taylor** (Stockton, South): What progress has been made in plans to procure replacements for the current Invincible class of aircraft carriers. [117896]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I refer my hon. Friend to the answer that I gave to my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford, North (Ms Perham) and for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) earlier today.

Ms Taylor: May I thank my right hon. Friend for the announcement that he has given the House today, because it is excellent news for British shipbuilders? Given the time delay before construction, is there any chance that he might indicate which shipyards will be considered? As I represent Stockton, South, may I persuade him to consider giving work to the excellent shipbuilders on the Tees? We believe that 30 or more warships will be built; will he give us some idea when and how they will be built so that our shipbuilders and workers are again given hope?

Mr. Hoon: I have certainly made it clear that an extensive programme of shipbuilding is under way. It could amount to 30 large ships and, certainly, they will all be built in the United Kingdom. As there are yards around the country, I would risk creating difficulties if I picked out some and not others. However, I assure my hon. Friend that full consideration will be given to all

British shipyards and all will be given the opportunity to tender. I look forward to that work providing for a revitalised British shipbuilding industry.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I apologise, Madam Speaker, for confusing you earlier.

I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for his earlier reply suggesting that BAE Systems will contribute to the replacement for Invincible and I am delighted that it has a base in Sutton-on-the-Forest in the Vale of York. Will he put the minds of those who work there at rest by assuring them that a merger with Boeing will not compromise the contract that he has in mind?

Mr. Hoon: I have seen press speculation about the prospects of a merger between BAE Systems and Boeing but, as far as I am aware, it is no more than press speculation.

Balkans

21. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What plans he has to increase the United Kingdom forces serving in the Balkans. [117900]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): We believe that flexibility and capability are the keys to successful operations in the Balkans. We keep our operational commitments under constant review and have the flexibility to adjust our commitment to match the security situation.

We have agreed to deploy to Kosovo a Phoenix battery of some 170 personnel to operate unmanned aerial surveillance drones, and two additional Gazelle helicopters equipped with specialist surveillance equipment to reinforce our contribution to KFOR.

Mr. Swayne: On the very question of flexibility and the need to maintain flexibility, will the Minister reflect on the evidence produced last year that, in the first nine months of last year, 40 per cent. of the reservists supporting our forces in the Balkans theatre were infantrymen? As the decision in the strategic defence review was to cut the fighting capability of the infantry reserves by half, will he now review that decision in light of the need to maintain the flexibility to which he referred?

Mr. Spellar: As I have told the hon. Gentleman previously, we hope that a higher percentage of the reserve forces in Kosovo will come from the specialist arms. That reflects shortages elsewhere in the availability of those groups and the economic pressures on some of them. I pay considerable tribute to those not just in Kosovo, but in Bosnia who are engaged on the infantry side. I met some of them a couple of months ago when I was there. They perform an excellent job, which is well appreciated by their counterparts in the regular forces, and they thoroughly enjoy doing it.

On the overall picture for the reserve forces, we have to consider all the arguments that we gave when we restructured the Territorial Army, in particular, and examine where the priorities lie. Home defence is no longer the reserve forces' key priority. As the hon. Gentleman rightly identified, their priority is to form part of the overall force and to play their part in the more expeditionary nature of our forces. They are doing that well, but that does not undermine in any way the restructuring and reshaping of the Territorial forces.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Given that the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps, which was in control of Kosovo until recently, has now been replaced by the Eurocorps, will the Minister join me in congratulating ARRC on the excellent role that it performed in Kosovo, which I saw when I was there a few weeks ago? How is the transfer to Eurocorps going, and does the Minister agree that the role played by Eurocorps will demonstrate the ability of European forces to work together in co-operation, without American support being necessary?

Mr. Spellar: I join the hon. Gentleman—and, I am sure, the whole House—in paying tribute to the role played by the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps under British leadership, not only in the immediate past, but during the Kosovo engagement. I also welcome the introduction of Eurocorps; the transition is working well. The important message is that it is not only ARRC that is capable of undertaking such tasks. That is welcome, because it reduces the pressure on our armed forces. It also helps to reinforce the main argument that we have advanced in the context of the European security and defence identity, which is the importance of the defence capability initiative in ensuring that European forces can undertake such roles. Demonstrating their ability to do so will be critical in maintaining the long-term stability of the alliance.

Departmental Land

22. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will estimate the total square mileage of land owned by his Department *(a)* 10 years ago, *(b)* five years ago and *(c)* now; and how much of this land is surplus to requirements. [117901]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): The total area of land owned by the Ministry of Defence was 240,600 hectares in 1990, 240,300 in 1995 and 238,800 in 1999. That equates to 928.96 square miles in 1990, 927.80 in 1995 and 922.01 in 1999. The figure for the total area of land in disposal is not maintained centrally. However, I will write to the hon. Gentleman once that information has been collated, and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am immensely grateful for those numbers, which I shall try to remember—I may have to consult *Hansard* tomorrow. However, the Minister did not deal with the fourth part of my question, about land surplus to requirements. May I take it that some of us have scored a 100 per cent. successful campaign in ensuring that the Ministry of Defence no longer holds any land that is surplus to requirements? Is not the central point that we must be flexible about the land we retain, especially for training purposes, in view

of a development that the Minister might be able to confirm, which is that significantly less land is now available in Germany for training our armed services?

Dr. Moonie: In the riveting excitement of reading out the figures, I overlooked part of the hon. Gentleman's question. Land in disposal is, by definition, land surplus to requirements. Such parcels of land come up fairly regularly at present, and this year we are on target to meet the sales requirement that we have placed on ourselves. We retain land only to support the delivery of operational capability and for other essential purposes. We keep the size of the estate under constant review, to ensure that it is no larger than is required for those purposes. However, it is true that, because of the change in distribution of our armed services, we have been putting greater pressure than we did formerly on much of the land that we use in this country.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): What is the target for disposal of land? Large areas of land, including many beauty spots, have been held for many years for training purposes. How much land is surplus to training requirements?

Dr. Moonie: We dispose only of land that is genuinely surplus to our requirements. We use land in national parks because that is, and will remain, essential to our requirements. Our target is to sell £700 million worth of land from the estate by 2001-02, and I am happy to say that we are now ahead of target.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): If Major-General Palmer's review of training establishments leads to a reduction of training establishments in Aldershot and the surrounding area, will it be the Government's intention to contract the Aldershot garrison and to sell off some of the land that falls inside the garrison premises?

I have just seen the consultation document about the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. If DERA is to be cut by three quarters, will it be the Government's intention to maintain the headquarters of the new public-sector operation at Farnborough, where £70 million has recently been expended on brand-new buildings?

Dr. Moonie: On the latter part of the hon. Gentleman's question, the answer is yes. On the former part, we have made no plans yet for the disposal of land at Aldershot, nor for reconfiguration of our forces there. However, as I have said, that is under constant review.

Roll On/Roll Off Ferries

23. **Mr. Julian Brazier** (Canterbury): If he will make a statement on progress on the purchase or leasing of roll on/roll off ferries for sealift for the forces. [117903]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): On current plans, we intend to place a contract this year, under private finance initiative arrangements, for a long-term managed sealift capability equivalent to six ships to support the joint rapid reaction force. A final decision will not be made until we have fully assessed the bids that we have received.

Mr. Brazier: As a former secretary of the parliamentary maritime group, may I join other Members on both sides of the House in expressing extreme concern that an order of this importance could be placed with a yard abroad, when we have lost so much shipyard capacity? We had a cheap shot earlier about a contract for two ships placed by the previous Government. Did the Secretary of State take legal advice on whether the contract could be framed in such a way as to fall within the EU's exemption for military projects? If he sought such advice, may we have a copy of it in the Library?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman referred to my earlier observation as a "cheap shot". However, the requirement for sea-going lift for the rapid reaction force was the same in January 1997 as that which the present Government identified as part of the strategic defence review. On the strict legal advice that we received, it was concluded that if these vessels were to be available for commercial purposes, that commerciality must by necessity be reflected in the procurement process. The previous Government came to the same conclusion.

As the hon. Gentleman conceded, we are operating under relevant European and World Trade Organisation public procurement rules. Those rules prohibit preferential treatment for the United Kingdom industry because the vessels concerned are clearly non-warlike; they are available for commercial purposes. By that definition, they must be considered under the relevant EU rules. The hon. Gentleman knows that, his colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench know that, and not only did the previous Government know that but they operated under precisely the same rules.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Would my right hon. Friend like to undertake a short, sharp study of how often our European compatriots have managed to pass on what are basically defence contracts under existing rules to nationalities other than their own and to work forces other than those of their own nationalities?

Mr. Hoon: The British Government are careful to ensure that all relevant EU rules are observed by our partners in the EU. The contracts are published in the *Official Journal*. That is the transparent process that the EU requires. We ensure that other countries participate in those rules as effectively as we do.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) talked about six ships. As I understand it, two of them will be available for trade and four will be used only by the Royal Navy. Is it legally possible for those four ships to be built only in this country?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands the nature of the contract. The essence of ensuring that the ships are commercially useful is to have them available to the Government at different periods of notice when a crisis requires their availability. Some will be available at very short notice and others will have rather longer notice periods. In the interim, therefore, they will be available for commercial purposes. As they are available for commercial purposes, they cannot be described as "warlike". Therefore, they do not fall within the exception that is set out in the EU procurement rules.

France

25. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): When he last met the French Defence Minister to discuss defence co-operation. [117905]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I last met the French Defence Minister to discuss bilateral defence co-operation on 25 November 1999 at the UK-France summit in London. We have also met more recently at multilateral meetings where more general issues were discussed.

Mr. Bercow: Given President Chirac's description of the United States as a hyperpower that requires to be counterbalanced, the modest financial commitment of the French and their notorious unreliability, why does not the right hon. Gentleman stop sitting on the fence and simply accept what is apparent to most right-thinking people: that the rock of American defence co-operation is infinitely preferable to the shifting quicksand of French defence co-operation?

Mr. Hoon: Certainly, the hon. Gentleman represents rightward thinking.

Mr. Bercow: Right thinking.

Mr. Hoon: "Rightward thinking" is what I said. That is a reflection, sadly, of the anti-European attitudes of large numbers of those who sit on the Opposition Benches. What is important for Britain is not only that we maintain the strength of our excellent alliance with the United States through NATO, but that we can bring together the European nations to make an effective contribution to NATO as an alliance.

Energy Policy

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): With permission, Madam Speaker, I would like to make a statement to the House on energy policy.

The central objective of the Government's energy policy is to ensure secure, diverse and sustainable supplies of energy at competitive prices.

In 1998 the Government published a White Paper on energy sources for electricity generation. The White Paper identified significant distortions in the operation of the electricity market. In particular, there were distortions in the operation of the electricity trading pool. These distortions had artificially encouraged a rash of new investment in gas-fired generation, mainly at the expense of existing coal-fired plant. There was also inadequate competition in the electricity market, particularly in the coal-fired generation sector. These distortions in the market meant that electricity prices were higher than necessary. The White Paper set out a programme of reform to remove the distortions and create a competitive market that could operate more vigorously and effectively.

While the reforms identified were being implemented, the Government decided to apply a stricter consents policy for gas-fired stations. We made it clear at the time that this policy was a short-term, temporary measure, aimed at protecting diversity and security of supply while the distortions in the market were removed.

This policy has been in place since October 1998. It created a temporary presumption against the approval of any new gas-fired power stations. It was a tough policy, but one that we felt was justified.

Under the application of the policy proposals, 15 gas-fired power stations were refused clearance. As I know from the representations received from a number of hon. Members, those decisions often meant that employment opportunities were denied and economic regeneration was not created. The White Paper set out a radical reform programme that would need to be implemented before we lifted the stricter gas consents policy. The main elements of the programme were, first, reform of the trading arrangements in England and Wales; secondly, seeking practical opportunities for the sale of generating capacity by the major coal-fired generators; and thirdly, pressing ahead with competition in electricity supply for all customers, including domestic customers

Good progress on the reform programme has been made. We have opened the domestic market to competition, giving choice to all consumers, and there has been a substantial degree of divestment of coal-fired generating plant, increasing the number of coal-fired generators. Our programme for reforming the trading arrangements is well under way. There are already signs that the electricity market is becoming more competitive, and that wholesale electricity prices are considerably lower than they were at the time of the White Paper.

In the White Paper, we made it clear that we expected to lift the stricter gas consents policy as soon as we concluded, on the basis of advice from the Director General of Gas and Electricity Markets, that the reform programme had been implemented, and that the market distortions had been removed.

Last Thursday, the director general reported to me that, in his view, substantial progress had been made in the areas of reform outlined in the White Paper. I have placed a copy of his report in the Libraries of the House and in the Vote Office. In short, his report concludes that the reform programme is almost complete. The sole remaining element are the new electricity trading arrangements. I expect them to be in place by October this year. As soon as that has been achieved, I intend to lift the stricter consents policy.

Lifting the stricter consents policy will represent an important step forward in the Government's energy policy. It will provide for full competition in the electricity market by allowing new entrants to challenge existing players. That will ensure that electricity prices remain as low as possible to the benefit of all consumers, including businesses, who need low electricity prices to compete internationally.

It will also enable new power station developments to go ahead if they are viable in the reformed market, thus providing new job opportunities, especially through the creation of new energy parks, which have been proposed by some potential developers.

Today's announcement will be welcomed by the offshore oil and gas industry and its contractors. It will also allow new gas stations that are genuinely competitive, especially combined heat and power stations, to contribute to the enhancement of the United Kingdom's energy efficiency and carbon saving.

Lifting the stricter gas consents policy will mean that the existing presumption against new gas-fired generation will no longer apply. The new initiative for proposals for power stations will remain for private sector companies to consider, to meet the evolving needs of the energy market. That market will be influenced by measures such as exemption from the climate change levy for combined heat and power and enhanced capital allowances.

The Government strongly support CHP and we will expect developers to be able to show that they have explored opportunities to use it. We shall discuss with developers information that needs to be submitted as part of notifications under section 14 of the Energy Act 1976 and applications under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989.

I have given careful consideration to the impact of lifting the stricter consents policy on the coal industry. From 1985 through to the early 1990s, the coal industry suffered a steep decline, with employment falling from 270,000 people to fewer than 20,000. That was a severe blow to workers and their families. It had a devastating impact on many small—and in some cases isolated—communities. The Government have put in place a major regeneration programme for those coalfield areas. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced in December last year that some £354 million would be invested over three years in coalfield regeneration. That was in addition to the more than £1 billion that is devoted each year to regeneration of local authority areas containing coalfields.

Our coal industry is by far the most efficient in Europe. Germany, which has the largest coal industry in the Community, produces about 20 per cent. more coal than us with nearly ten times our labour force. The German industry benefits from massive Government subsidies, as do the French and Spanish coal industries.

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Our coal industry faces stiff competition not only from gas generation but also from imported coal. The Government's policy remains that it is for the coal industry to find its own place in a competitive energy market. However, we recognise that ending the stricter consents policy will create a new market and new challenges for the coal industry.

We cannot block international competition. Indeed, we do not wish to do that. However, it is the task of Government to lead people through the process of change, to create a framework which enables the coal industry to move forward, to help it manage change rather than be submerged by it and to respond positively to the challenges ahead.

In those circumstances, the Government have been discussing with the European Commission the potential for state aid to the coal industry. Any proposal to pay aid will, of course, be subject in advance to approval from the European Commission. Any aid would be temporary—during the transitional period—and would end with the termination of the European Coal and Steel Community agreement in 2002.

Of course, the Government cannot give absolute guarantees about the future shape of the industry. It will be for the owners to determine the future of any individual pit. Although it is too soon to give an indication of the total cost of any aid over the two years before we have spoken to all the parties and had further discussions with the Commission, we need to identify eligible mines that might be entitled to aid. The cost would also be affected by movements in world coal prices. There has been speculation that the total aid to the coal industry could be as high as £100 million. I am not ruling out the possibility of expenditure at that level.

Our arrangements will treat coal producers in a fair and non-discriminatory way. My Department is developing an appropriate scheme of state aids for the coal industry in discussion with the European Commission. We will consult the coal industry and other interested parties and invite interested parties to make their views known to my Department.

In relation to the continued development of our policy for energy, we faced a choice: uncontrolled change, forced by markets and commercial pressures, or a process of reform that delivers economic efficiency and social justice so that individuals and the communities in which they live can be partners in change. The Government have chosen the latter approach.

Lifting the stricter gas consents policy, coupled with the new trading arrangements, will complete our reforms of the electricity market, provide cheaper electricity and lead to economic regeneration and job creation. Today's announcement will allow the coal industry to compete in the new markets that we are creating. It is a vital part of our programme of modernisation and reform and will be good news for hard-working people and their families and communities. I commend it to the House.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): In three years, the Government have failed to produce a coherent energy strategy, and nothing that we have heard today suggests a long-term strategy. They introduced the moratorium on gas-fired power stations, but were quick to make an exception for south Wales when the Welsh Assembly elections were looming. The Secretary of State's rationale in his 1998 energy White Paper was bogus, because no one believed that companies would invest in new power stations based on a temporary hike in electricity prices.

We welcome the Secretary of State's U-turn on gas-fired power stations, but his policy was wrong in the first place. On coal, the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), said:

> Our aim is to put all fuels on a level playing field, and not give priority to any one. We do not propose to subsidise any part of the UK coal industry. Coal producers themselves have asked for fairness, not favours.—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1998; Vol. 314, c. 1171.]

What action has he taken to ensure fairness for our efficient UK coal producers, bearing in mind that France, Germany and Spain subsidise their industries by some £3 billion a year? He referred to it, but what action have the Government taken to address the concerns expressed by RJB Mining and others at the unfair subsidies given by European Union grants? Does he believe that many of those are illegal? If so, what has he done about it?

What approaches has the Secretary of State made to the Commission to date? He mentioned that he is speaking to the Commission, but will the aid be approved swiftly or will we be treated to another fiasco like Rover? Is it true, as reported in *The Guardian* today, that he removed two civil servants from key posts because of their opposition to the Government's energy policy?

How does today's announcement fit into an overall energy strategy? What plans has the Secretary of State made to achieve a reduction in nuclear components by 2020, and then to meet environmental targets? Surely an energy strategy must cover the whole energy mix.

Is not the announcement contingent on the separation of distribution and supply of electricity for which the Utilities Bill provides, together with the new electricity trading arrangements in the Bill—a Bill whose drafting and passage have been handled with unprecedented incompetence?

As the Secretary of State has now clearly indicated that the Government intend to subsidise the coal industry, may we hear from him the broader strategy for subsidising industry in general? Will he explain why one sector is deemed to be eligible for subsidy, while others are not? What is the rationale behind subsidising coal and not, for example, shipbuilding? It is important for the House to understand what the overall strategy is.

This Secretary of State runs a Department that works on a piecemeal basis, producing policy on the hoof. Given what we have heard today, energy is included in that piecemeal approach.

Mr. Byers: It is unfortunate that the proposals have not received a warm welcome. They reflect important progress in the development of an energy policy that is comprehensive and allows the market to work effectively. It is worth reminding the House of the mess that we inherited in regard to electricity trading arrangements. That is what happened, and Conservative Members know it.

There has been no U-turn. We clearly stated that we would ask the director general to report. He reported to me last Thursday on the progress made towards reform of

the electricity trading arrangements, and a copy of his report is in the Vote Office. The report makes it clear that the reform programme is almost complete, apart from the new trading arrangements. They will be introduced in October, which is why we shall be lifting the stricter gas consents policy then. That is entirely consistent with what we said at the time of the White Paper.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) asked about Baglan bay in south Wales. We have always said that our policy in that regard is a stricter gas consents policy, not a block on any new development. When considering our proposals for Baglan bay, we noted that it had exceptional technology and was developing an energy park according to a high-quality plan, which we were prepared to approve in the circumstances. I was pleased that we were able to do that.

The German, Spanish and French Governments are able to subsidise their coal industries under the European Coal and Steel Community agreement, which the Conservative Government signed in 1993. *[Interruption.]* Both the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton were members of that Government. It was agreed that the arrangement would hold until 2002. The other countries are simply using the powers that the Conservative Government agreed they could use.

As for the question of civil servants, there is no truth in what was said in the *Guardian* article.

Environmental objectives are important. That is why we strongly support combined heat and power, and why we feel that gas-fired power stations will make an important contribution.

On the wider issue of subsidy, let me point out that the Government support shipbuilding through the shipbuilding intervention fund. I introduced a degree of flexibility to the arrangements that had not been there before, as a result of which orders have been secured for our shipbuilding and ship repair industry that would not have been secured otherwise.

The Government will provide subsidy where appropriate, but we will not do so in a way that props up failing industries. We will support industries that have a real future. Some of the industries that Conservative Members say have no future, such as shipbuilding and coal mining, do have a real future. People in those industries, and local communities, need to know that they have a Government who are on their side.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Tories have a cheek to talk about subsidies because, a fortnight ago, there was an announcement that the farming industry would get several hundred millions and the Tories' answer was that it was not enough?

Will my right hon. Friend take it on board that, instead of handing over a big cheque to Budge, who got the industry for a song from the previous Government, it would have made much more sense to have taken the coal industry back into public ownership? Does he accept that some of us, especially in Derbyshire, where there is not a single pit left—they were all closed by the Tory Government—and where there is mass unemployment, will not take kindly to the idea of some of that money enabling Budge and his allies to exploit opencast operations? It would be much better to ensure that all that money goes to deep mines only.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that, when the paper was submitted to us on the various options in relation to the coal industry, option number 15 was renationalisation of the coal industry, but we did not take it much further than that. On the significant point about support for the coal industry generally, we will have to introduce a scheme that does not discriminate against one sector over another. However, within the scheme, we will be able to give greater emphasis to particular parts of the industry. When we work up the scheme, we will be particularly mindful of the need to improve productivity, particularly in deep-mine pits.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I am sure that all Members representing mining constituencies, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who has led the fight for Ellington colliery, will welcome the Secretary of State's support for the industry.

More broadly, I welcome the lifting of the moratorium on gas-fired power stations. Can the Secretary of State quantify some of the effects of that on the Government's Kyoto targets? Today's statement gives rather contrary indicators. It would be useful to know by how much the statement will contribute to the saving of carbon emissions, bearing in mind the fact that every unit of energy produced by gas produces 40 per cent. less carbon than coal.

How important is the high value of the pound for the difficulties of the coal industry, given that the pound has appreciated against the Australian dollar by 20 per cent. and against the South African rand by 40 per cent.—they are some of our major competitors? Does he not accept that the Government's inability to deliver a stable and competitive exchange rate is a major factor for the industry, as it is for other manufacturing enterprises?

Will the Secretary of State comment on this morning's Rowntree report on the effectiveness of Government aid to mining communities? It appears to suggest that much of the aid has been ineffectual and needs to be refocused in a radically different way.

Mr. Byers: Today's statement is primarily about the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy and deals with the consequences of that. It would have been foolish not to recognise that that significant change—which we want to introduce from October—will have an impact on the coal industry. The Government will not walk away from their responsibilities to the coal industry and to the communities that depend on coal mining.

On the specific points in relation to the Kyoto targets, the fact that more energy will be produced from gas-fired power stations will obviously make a significant contribution, but it will need to run alongside programmes that the Government are already introducing, particularly to develop cleaner coal technology, which we think will help, as we maintain the coal burn at least at present levels—I hope that those levels will rise as a result of our support—to make an important contribution to achieving those environmental objectives.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the value of sterling. One of the key issues in coal importation, particularly from European countries, has been the subsidy received

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by industries in those countries. The German coal industry, for example, receives from the German Government the equivalent of £56 million a week in subsidy. The United Kingdom coal industry has asked us for fairness, not favours. Fairness is achieved by providing a level of subsidy which—even at the modest £100 million that we may be prepared to spend—will still enable the UK coal industry to be competitive against German coal, as the UK industry itself is highly efficient.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I have today read the Rowntree report with great interest. It contains important messages, but it also states that the particular needs of some of the communities that have been affected by pit closures will have to be met. I know that the Deputy Prime Minister will be considering very carefully the lessons that we can learn from the Rowntree report's findings and proposals.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): May I express my thanks and appreciation to my right hon. Friend for his statement on energy policy? For far too long the coal mining industry suffered, particularly from Tory policies. His statement on help to the mining industry is therefore particularly welcome.

Is my right hon. Friend considering a long-term policy on the mining industry? If so, will he examine the possibility of introducing the fluidised bed system for generating electricity from coal? Introduction of such a system would be one way of ensuring a long-term future for the mining industry.

In considering the issue of combined heat and power, how much attention has been paid to using domestic and industrial waste in CHP programmes? Use of such waste would serve the dual purpose of generating electricity and heat and of disposing of waste that would otherwise go into landfill.

We have to address those issues. Doing that, and some assurances on a long-term programme for the coal industry, would be a major step forward in reassuring my communities in the Normanton constituency.

Mr. Byers: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome of the measures that we have been able to announce today. He is right to say that the arrangement for the state aid that we wish to provide for the coal industry is transitional. We intend that the aid should end in July 2002, when the current European Coal and Steel Community agreement itself ends. We shall therefore have to consider other ways of planning for the industry's future.

I have no doubt that we will have to consider new ways of developing programmes. There will also have to be greater innovation in the coal industry if it is going to be in a strong position to compete in the years ahead. I have no doubt that, by providing this breathing space for the industry, it will be able to seize those opportunities.

My hon. Friend makes a very important point about combined heat and power and the use of waste. We are developing a policy on renewables, and the use of waste will make a very important contribution within that context. We have set a challenging but achievable target on amounts of energy generated from renewables. The opportunity of linking that policy with combined heat and power offers some very real prospects of meeting both our environmental concerns and our energy objectives.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I have 30 Members seeking to question the statement. Questions to the Secretary of State must be very brisk, and I rely on the Secretary of State to give me brisk answers, please.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): The Secretary of State will be aware of a specific application to build a new gas-fired power station in Langage, in my constituency, right next to 45,000 houses on the edge of Dartmoor, overlooking the rolling beauty of the South Hams. The application is opposed by everyone in my constituency, including me. Will he undertake to look at that application, which is on his desk, before the moratorium is lifted, consider it carefully on its merits, and then reject it point blank?

Mr. Byers: I am sure that we shall take those representations into account in considering the matter.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) pointed out that the Conservatives destroyed the mining industry in Derbyshire by closing all the Coal Board pits. However, one small mine—Moorside mine—is left in Eckington, in my constituency. What will be the position of the small mines when state aid is provided? The money is not just for Budge. The 29 jobs at stake in Eckington also need to be protected. What will be done, and when will it be delivered?

Mr. Byers: I invite the owners of the mine at Eckington to get in touch with my Department. The scheme that we want to introduce applies to all coal producers. Even small mines such as that referred to by my hon. Friend will come within the state aid schemes. If the owners contact the Department, we can discuss what methods will need to be put in place to support improving productivity.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): The coal industry will be disappointed that more details of the subsidy scheme have not been given. How will it help Blenkinsopp colliery in my constituency? It employs nearly 100 miners and is threatened with closure in 18 months unless the management can raise £200,000 to £300,000 to open new seams. They have been unable to do that because of the low price of coal. Will the scheme help such collieries?

Mr. Byers: It is worth reminding the House that the price of coal has recovered over the past few weeks. Our scheme will go from pit to pit. Blenkinsopp will be able to discuss it with the Department. If it meets the criteria, it will be able to qualify as well as other pits.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): My right hon. Friend's announcement is excellent news for Wales and for my constituency, particularly for Tower colliery, which remained open despite the best efforts of the Conservatives—with the exception of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who gave us

every assistance when the miners bought out the pit. The pit has made a profit year on year, despite the fact that the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry told us that the mine should shut and I should tell the men to throw in the towel. We did not throw in the towel and the pit has been a success. That shows that there is a secure future for coal and that the Government care about the social consequences of restructuring our older industries, again unlike the Conservatives. What can Tower hope to get from the announcement? Under the previous Government, I took the case to the European Union and the Energy Commissioner told me that the EU thought that the pit should get a subsidy, but the British Government were against it.

Madam Speaker: Order. Questions must be very much to the point now.

Mr. Byers: The scheme that we have been able to announce today covers Wales and Scotland as well as England. Pits such as Tower will be able to qualify under the criteria that we intend to develop. Given the efforts made by my hon. Friend and some Conservative Members to save Tower, I hope that the colliery will see greater opportunities in the scheme and that the commitment of the work force and the community to Tower colliery will reap long-term rewards.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I welcome the lifting of the moratorium and the contents of the statement not only for Tower, but for north-west Wales. The Secretary of State will be aware of representations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) about a scheme that is vital for the future planning of industries such as Anglesey Aluminium. What criteria will be used to decide on the exemption of combined heat and power projects from the climate change levy?

Mr. Byers: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments, particularly about the benefits that may well come to north-west Wales from the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy. We had to defer a decision on an application in relation to Anglesey because of the policy that was in place. That was not a rejection. The application still lies on the table in the Department. If the promoters wish to come forward, we shall be able to consider it again. I am conscious of the important role that the Anglesey Aluminium plant can play. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has already said all that he wants to say about the climate change levy as it affects combined heat and power.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. After all the years of seeing neighbouring coal mines being closed, the coal miners at Maltby colliery in my constituency will be heartened to hear that the Government are standing up for the coal industry. The British coal industry cannot compete against heavily subsidised coal not only from within the European Union but from countries such as Poland. Will coal's share of the electricity supply in the balanced energy policy be met by coal mined in the British coalfield?

Mr. Byers: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns. We have to ensure that our anti-dumping rules are vigorously enforced. We have raised with the Polish Government the subject of the amount of coal coming in from Poland, and we hope that action will be taken in the near future.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Does the Secretary of State believe that Ellington colliery is likely to be saved under the terms of the statement, especially given its tremendous importance to the local economy of Northumberland? If so, does he realise that people will be grateful, and that he has moved from believing that it would be impossible to give such aid under European rules to recognising that we can actively pursue such state aid?

Mr. Byers: The situation has moved on since November 1999, and we have considered carefully the opportunities that are available to us, but any scheme will still need to be approved by the European Commission. We must work with the EC to ensure that any scheme that we propose satisfies the Commission. I am very much aware of the important role that Ellington plays in the local community. My constituency is a little more than 25 miles away, and I am acutely aware that Ellington is the sole deep mine remaining in the north-east of England. Decisions about individual pits will be taken by the owners—in this case, RJB Mining—but, in the light of today's announcement, the company may have something to say about its proposals for both Ellington and Clipstone.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly in respect of the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy. He may know that, in Plymouth, the city council, the chamber of commerce and the regional development agency will be keen for this to pave the way for the go-ahead for the Langage energy park, which is opposed by the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter). In addition to considering the important environmental aspects, will he take into account the £600 million investment for jobs and the effect of bringing in the only generator west of Hinkley Point, which, through black start-up, will protect industry, attracting jobs and business to the south-west?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is clearly already making strong representations on behalf of the development. We will need to take those into account when we consider the application.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Given that every time the Secretary of State signs a consent for a new gas station, he will effectively be signing the redundancy notices of a large number of coal miners, what is his forecast of how much gas capacity he will license over the next year and how many coal miners' jobs will go as a result? Is not the statement a smokescreen to try to delay the P45s for the miners until after the general election, and does it not in practice mean the death of a large number of mines? Will he come clean and tell us?

Mr. Byers: That is a bit rich from someone who was a member of the Cabinet in 1993, when 33 pits were closed. I have announced a balanced approach. We will lift the stricter gas consents policy, so we will provide state aid to the coal industry to overcome the challenges that it will face over the next two years or so. I do not

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agree with the right hon. Gentleman, who seems to think that, because a policy decision is taken, redundancies must follow. That was the case under the Government of which he was a member. Tories made decisions and jobs were lost. That will not happen as a result of our policy, which will ensure that there is a viable future for the coal industry within a competitive energy market.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): This is obviously a policy through which new Labour will begin to work in the heartlands, and I hope that that continues. The miners of Ellington colliery, and their families, were delighted to hear the news this morning, as I heard it on the wireless on my way here. There was a whisper of it yesterday, but they were delighted by the confirmation that the Labour Government have decided to save Ellington colliery, because their jobs would have gone at the end of the month. I congratulate my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Mr. Murphy), who has spent enormous energies on the fight to save Ellington colliery. He is not here today, because he is at the pit, addressing concerns about the future. May I also say that it is good to see a Minister, not civil servants, taking decisions?

Mr. Byers: I look forward to continuing to try to convince my hon. Friend that a new Labour Government can act for all our people. This is a new Labour decision, which will help markets work effectively and lead people through change. I look forward to further debates with my hon. Friend on the subject. On a serious point, this is an important development of our energy policy. It will lift the stricter gas consents policy, which stood in the way of the market working effectively. To overcome the difficulties that might be caused as a result, we are also providing state aid to the coal industry. The combination of the two will ensure that we have employment creation through the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy and can maintain levels of employment in the coal industry.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): As the exciting new Labour Government cannot do anything until Brussels allows them to, can the Minister give us some idea when he is likely to get approval? Bearing it in mind that the opencast industry provides jobs in areas of unemployment and now works to strict environmental rules, will he make it clear that there will be no discrimination against opencast in his new proposals?

Mr. Byers: The scheme will be run on a non-discriminatory basis.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): Let us pursue that issue. Is my right hon. Friend confident that the European Commission will approve his scheme promptly, given the short-term nature of the coal aid, which will be made available only until 2002?

Mr. Byers: Discussions that we have had already with the European Commission indicate that it has no objection in principle to a scheme starting now and lasting until July 2002. We will obviously have to continue those discussions, and I hope that we will be able to put the scheme in place as soon as possible. In the discussions that we have already had, we have been able to assure the coal producers that finance will be available during this financial year, and that is the important element as far as they are concerned.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the whole purpose of this announcement today relaxing the gas consents policy is that more gas-fired power stations should come on-stream? Will he return to the question put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood)? If the Secretary of State intends to lift the gas consents policy, how much more gas-fired capacity does he anticipate authorising during the coming year or two years? The only sector that will lose out from that policy will be the coal sector. Therefore, it is disingenuous to relax gas consents policy at the same time as giving £100 million to the coal industry. The Government are leading the coal industry into believing that it has a secure future, when it has anything but.

Mr. Byers: I made it clear in my statement that the coal industry will need to compete in the new market that we are creating, and that is the reality of the situation. The coal producers are acutely aware of that, and they have said that they would have difficulty competing in the short term without some state aid. That is why we are making those proposals. We will get the balance right and the coal producers have indicated that, with the support that we are able to provide, they will be able to compete effectively against any new gas-fired power stations that come on stream. No restriction will be placed on the number of gas-fired stations, and we will approve those projects that we feel are appropriate for the energy market that we intend to create.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): On behalf of the all-party coalfield communities group, may I welcome the package announced to the House by my right hon. Friend today? It will be good for the industry and for mining communities, but especially good for the mining machinery manufacturing industry. My right hon. Friend spoke about lifting the moratorium on gas-powered power stations, but will he consider allowing the electricity pool reforms to bed in before that happens? Collieries in areas such as Ellington Lynemouth are likely to close in four or five years. Will he ensure that miners in such areas are given further training, so that they have the skills to move on to other industries when the collieries eventually close?

Mr. Byers: The decision to lift the stricter gas consents policy from October was based on the report that I received last Thursday from the Director General of Gas and Electricity Markets, which was very much in line with the proposals in the White Paper. We intend to lift those consents when the new trading arrangements come into force in the autumn of this year.

My hon. Friend points out that employment levels might decrease in five or six years. We do not know for certain that that will happen, but it is clear that proposals for retraining and for economic regeneration must be in place. We will need a period of time in which they can develop, and the Government will be responsive to any proposals in that direction.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The question from my right hon. Friend the

Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) to the Prime Minister last Wednesday seems to have provoked a remarkably—and admirably—rapid response from the Government. Its underlying theme was the climate change levy: does today's announcement have any implications, besides combined heat and power, for that levy?

Mr. Byers: As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), I do not think that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will make any significant changes to the way in which the climate change levy will be introduced or implemented.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): As the Member of Parliament whose constituency probably has the most gas stations in it—other developments there have been held up by the moratorium—I certainly welcome the fact that the stricter consents policy has been lifted today. That is good news for job creation and industrial growth on the south bank of the Humber. About 7,000 jobs are at stake, and it is good to know that lobbying pays off in the long run.

However, will my right hon. Friend say how quickly consents will be given after the stricter policy is lifted in October?

Mr. Byers: At the moment, 15 consents have been submitted, and deferred. We will have to talk to the promoters of those consents to see whether they wish to maintain them as originally proposed or whether they want to change certain specifics. Over the next few months, we will study the timing of new applications in relation to the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Secretary of State said in answer to an earlier question that there is no objection in principle from the European Commission for the grant that he has announced. Does that mean that there was such an objection to the grant for Longbridge, which was never granted by the European Commission? If there is no objection in principle to today's announcement, when will permission for it be given?

Mr. Byers: Two quite distinct schemes are in operation. Any state aid for the car industry is covered by the vehicle framework, which has separate procedures and is administered by a different Commissioner. The state aid proposed today comes under the European Coal and Steel Community's agreement, and the methods involved are quite different. We will need to work out the details of the scheme with the United Kingdom industry. When that is in place, an application will be made to the European Union. However, we expect funds to be made available during the course of this financial year.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): My right hon. Friend's statement today will be of great help in maintaining continuity in the mining industry. Will he and his colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions therefore reconsider the closure of the mining inspectorate office in Doncaster?

Mr. Byers: I will certainly draw that issue to the attention of my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, who I think have policy responsibility for that matter.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The announcement will certainly be good news for the coal sector. The Secretary of State has also said that there is greater competition in the electricity market. Can he tell the House why he therefore still perceives a need for the overhead line transmission from Lackenby to Shipton in the Vale of York? What will happen to those coal-fired power stations in the constituencies of his hon. Friends—particularly Selby, Ferrybridge and Drax—when those consents are further applied for south of Shipton? Will he admit that there is no need for those pylons to be built?

Mr. Byers: I know that that issue is of great concern to many people in the hon. Lady's constituency. She has been a doughty campaigner, raising the matter and drawing it to our attention. My understanding is that the matter will be subject to an inquiry to see whether it is an appropriate development. It is probably best that we leave the inspector to conduct that inquiry.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Is my right hon. Friend aware that today's most welcome announcement should provide the opportunity for the signing of a new five-year deal for Selby coal between RJB Mining and AES, the new owner of Drax, the largest coal-fired power station in Europe? Does he think that there is every prospect of British coal, which is now a flexible, modern industry, being able to compete in international markets in a couple of years, particularly with the price of coal rising in those markets?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend has been a strong campaigner on behalf of the Selby coalfield. I am pleased that he believes that today's news will be of real benefit to Selby. He is right to point out that RJB is near to concluding an agreement with AES to provide coal to the Drax power station. I hope that that can be concluded in the near future, because, as he says, that will bring some long-term security to the Selby complex.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): In the interests of efficient energy generation and usage, I generally welcome the encouragement given to combined heat and power schemes. However, why will the Government not similarly encourage other renewables, or renewables in micro-CHP, by adopting net metering? Why have they specifically ruled this out in the Utilities Bill? Does the Minister understand that that would encourage the development of many renewable energy schemes?

Mr. Byers: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government are neutral with regard to net metering. However, we think that the 10 per cent. renewables target is the best way of encouraging people to use renewables in energy production.

Mr. Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): May I assure my right hon. Friend that many of my constituents will contrast favourably his actions with the brutal actions of the previous Government when they closed the pits and rigged the energy market against coal? May I also urge him, when he has the time, to look at another part of the Tory legacy? The interconnector seems to be a one-way device, by which continental electricity is pumped into this country, but we seem unable to send back electricity generated here.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Under the Conservative Government, more than 40 pits

[Mr. Byers]

were closed in the five years between 1992 and 1997. That is the Conservative legacy. They rigged the energy market against coal. That is the situation that we inherited. It is why we introduced a stricter gas consents policy—to ensure that we began to have a market that was working effectively—and why we are able, this autumn, to lift that stricter gas consents policy.

My hon. Friend raises an important point about the way in which the interconnector operates. I know that there are concerns, among many of my right hon. and hon. Friends and Members of other parties, about that. We will do what we can to make sure that the interconnector works in a way that is favourable to the British coal industry.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the Secretary of State has supposedly been pressing for the liberalisation of the European electricity market, can we take it as evidence of his poor power of persuasion that the French have now committed themselves to a liberalisation of only 26 per cent. and that, thus far, Belgium, Ireland and Greece have committed themselves to precisely nothing?

Mr. Byers: The improvements that we are beginning to see are far greater than those that we saw under the Conservative Government. I welcome the fact that the French Government are taking through their National Assembly the legislation that will open up the market for energy in France. We need to continue to ensure that the other markets are opened up. The real challenge in the context of Europe is to make a reality of the single market. That will benefit businesses in the United Kingdom and throughout Europe.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I remind my right hon. Friend that, within five miles of Ellesmere Port, 11 gas-fired power stations are in operation or are going through the application process. I think that eight are awaiting consent. Will he ensure that he does not grant consent on a first-come, first-served basis, but that he considers the strategic needs of industry in the area so that the approaches are co-ordinated?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend raises an important and practical point; we shall need to take a close look at how we deal with the large number of applications that were deferred pending the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy. I have no doubt that many more applications will be made over the next few months because we have indicated that the policy is to change. My hon. Friend makes the important point that we need a strategic over-view of how we can develop gas-fired power stations in the light of the new market that we want to create.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Before committing himself to a large sum of taxpayers' money, will the Secretary of State say what is his best estimate of the number of pits that will be viable once the scheme has ended and mines have to work in open competition with new gas-fired stations?

Mr. Byers: Ultimately, that will obviously be a matter for the owners to decide; it is not for the Government to determine. However, with targeted support, we can ensure that we provide the coal industry with the opportunity to meet those challenges. I regret that the hon. Gentleman would clearly not want to make such a subsidy available. However, that is wholly compatible with the policy adopted by Conservative Governments over the years.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): As chairman of the offshore oil and gas industry all-party group, I wholeheartedly welcome the lifting of the stricter consents policy on gas-fired power stations. There are thousands of jobs in the offshore industry, with 10 times more onshore. Such jobs are often concentrated in coastal towns, such as Lowestoft, which I represent, where there is high unemployment. Today's announcement is a hugely positive signal for the industry, as well as good news for the environment.

Has my right hon. Friend received any indication from the offshore operators as to the possible additional investment in gas-field development that might arise from the announcement? Will he try to obtain commitments on such expanded future investment from those operators?

Mr. Byers: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who has been a strong campaigner on behalf of the offshore industry. I am delighted to hear of his support for today's announcement. I have no doubt that the offshore industry will benefit as a result of the proposals that we have made—as indeed will those fabrication yards throughout the country that will have greater opportunities as a result of the lifting of the stricter gas consents policy. I am unaware of any specific proposals from the offshore contractors, but there is no doubt that the announcement will make a real difference to them.

Orders of the Day

Finance Bill

[Relevant documents: The Fifth Report from the Treasury Committee, Session 1999–2000, on The 2000 Budget, HC 379.]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.28 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Finance Bill continues to deliver on Labour's promises, enacting Budget decisions to deliver opportunity and security for the hard-working families of Britain. Through measures for enterprise and fairness, it takes further action to achieve our long-term goals—including new measures to encourage work, to improve productivity and to protect the environment. We are working hard for a stronger and fairer Britain, releasing substantial new resources for health and education, and for tackling child poverty, supporting pensioners, improving transport and tackling crime.

That is possible only because we are delivering a platform of stability and steady growth, leaving behind the boom and bust of the past. Inflation is now—

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Smith: I give way to the hon. Gentleman on boom and bust.

Sir Peter Tapsell: On stability, does the right hon. Gentleman recall that, when he was winding up the Budget debate, I put to him the fact that the greatly increased public expenditure under the Finance Bill would result in higher interest rates being imposed on us by the Bank of England, and that he denied that the Budget was expansionary? Indeed, he claimed, in effect, that it was a "contractionary" Budget. Has he noted that, since then, almost every economist has disagreed with him—including the International Monetary Fund?

Mr. Smith: As I pointed out to the hon. Gentleman when I was winding up the Budget debate, the Budget locks in the fiscal tightening since last year to the tune of 0.3 per cent. of GDP and then 0.2 per cent. of GDP. Moreover, I point out, as I did when I responded to the hon. Gentleman in the Budget debate, that we are looking at a current surplus of £17 billion, followed by £14 billion, followed by £16 billion, followed by £13 billion, followed by £8 billion. That Budget and that fiscal position are prudent. They lock in the tightening—by, I think, some 5 per cent. of GDP since before the general election—which the Government have achieved on the basis of following our sound and prudent rules for fiscal policy, the sensible arrangements that we have set up for monetary policy, and our firm grip on public spending. Therefore, I do not accept that—

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne) *rose—*

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford) *rose—*

Mr. Smith: I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon).

Mr. Sheldon: I did of course agree with my right hon. Friend generally on the Budget judgment that he made, but of course the Red Book omitted the amount paid for telephone licences, which I had estimated would be between £7 billion and £10 billion, but which is likely to be nearer £20 billion. That is obviously a very large increase in the revenue. Not all of it will come in this financial year, but it should have some impact on the expenditure or even, possibly, the revenue side. Will my right hon. Friend give us some idea of his thinking on these matters?

Mr. Smith: The prudent thing to do with such a large income is to use it to reduce debt, and that is what we plan to do with it.

I was saying that inflation is now low and stable.

Mr. Davies: Will the Chief Secretary give way?

Mr. Smith: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman when I have made a little more progress.

There are 800,000 more people in work than at the general election and, as I have said, the public finances are under control. It is worth reminding the House that we inherited from the Conservative party a public sector borrowing requirement of some £28 billion, and yet now, with our fiscal framework in place, we have the stream of current surpluses that I was just drawing to the attention of the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell).

Moreover, we inherited national debt that had doubled, and a debt to GDP ratio of 44 per cent. With our commitment to prudence, we have cut that ratio to 37 per cent. this year, and the Red Book shows it decreasing to 33 per cent. in the years ahead, cutting the millstone of debt that the Conservative party strung around the necks of the British people and saving £4 billion a year in debt interest.

Mr. Davies: Will the Chief Secretary give way?

Mr. Smith: In a few moments.

The Bill maintains our commitment to sustainability and prudence, locking in the fiscal tightening to an even greater extent than projected in last year's Budget, ensuring that we remain on track to meet the fiscal rules and to deliver steady growth. This, as we have said, is prudence for a purpose. Through the Budget and the Bill, we are not only locking in fiscal tightening but releasing substantial new resources for our key public service priorities.

Mr. Davies: The Chief Secretary keeps on saying—rather irrelevantly and, I am tempted to say,

[Mr. Davies]

rather disingenuously—that the present Budget locks in last year's Budget's fiscal tightening. Does he agree that it represents a discretionary fiscal loosening from this year forward to 2003-04?

Mr. Smith: I have already cited to the House the extent to which this is fiscal tightening—the 0.3 per cent. of GDP followed by the 0.2 per cent. of GDP. The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle referred to what various commentators have said about the Budget. It is important to point out that the Monetary Policy Committee has twice had the opportunity to examine the assumptions and forecasts surrounding the Budget—Mervyn King himself has commented on this. Having examined them, the committee saw no reason to change its policy or to change interest rates. That is a matter for members of the committee, but I believe that the House will want to take that judgment very seriously.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): On fiscal loosening, will the Chief Secretary confirm that the fiscal position has been tightened only in relation to what it was planned to be in the pre-Budget report of November 1999, but that it has been loosened with respect to fiscal policy as it was on 20 March 2000?

Mr. Smith: I have already cited several figures on that point. If the hon. Gentleman is looking further ahead, I commend to him—I do not often do this—the words of Professor Patrick Minford. When he unwrapped the assumptions around the Budget, he described it as unprecedented fiscal tightening. The hon. Gentleman might like to consider that point.

As a consequence of the stability and prudence and the sound public finances that we have put in place, working families are able to see the benefit. Thanks to sound economic management, we can cut taxes for working families—not only introducing the working families tax credit and the new 10p rate but, in clause 31, cutting the basic rate of income tax to 22p, its lowest level for nearly 70 years. By April next year, personal tax and benefit changes in this and previous Budgets will mean that households will on average be £460 a year better off and that families with children will on average be £850 a year better off. The tax burden on a single-earner family on average earnings with two children will be at its lowest since 1972.

Coupled with low inflation and economic growth, that adds up to substantial increase in living standards which is what really matters to people. For a single-earner family on average earnings with two children, living standards will rise by more than 10 per cent. over this Parliament. For a single-earner family on half average earnings, living standards will rise by 30 per cent. this year—the biggest annual rise for more than 25 years. A single-earner family on half average earnings will be £2,600 a year better off over the Parliament.

Our measures will also help achieve our goal that every child should have the best possible start in life. As the Prime Minister has said, child poverty is a scar on the soul of Britain. That is why we set out in the Budget our ambition to halve child poverty by 2010 and end it altogether by 2020.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In the light of what the Chief Secretary has just said about the working families tax credit, will he tell me why Nicole Wanford, a low-earning, single parent constituent in Buckingham who has a salary of little more than £10,000 a year after tax, should pay an effective tax rate of 78 per cent. on a modest £600 bonus that her employer paid her? Does the right hon. Gentleman understand that her view of the Government's operation of the policy would not constitute parliamentary language?

Mr. Smith: When Members raise individual cases in the House, the best thing that I can do is undertake to examine the circumstances of those cases. However, such a marginal rate of reduction should not arise from the working families tax credit. Indeed, one of the things that it and our other reforms do is reduce marginal rates of reduction, because our policy is all about helping and encouraging people to move from welfare to work. That is what it has done very successfully.

I referred to the issue of tackling child poverty and was about to point out that 1.2 million of Britain's children will be out of poverty as a consequence of measures already introduced in this Parliament and in the Budget. By April next year, personal tax and benefit changes alone in this and previous Budgets will mean that a single-earner family on average earnings with two children will be £370 a year better off. A family on half average earnings will be £2,600 a year better off and, for that matter, the poorest two-child family on income support will be £1,500 a year better off. What is more, the Bill will take further steps to increase support for children. An additional 50p a week will be added to the children's tax credit when it is introduced in April next year, so that it will be worth up to £442 a year—more than twice the value of the married couples allowance that it replaces. We are introducing a £4.35 a week increase in the child credit in the working families tax credit from June this year, and the same increase in child allowances in income support from October.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On the working families tax credit and while the Chief Secretary is in generous reviewing mode, will he take a look at the case of lone parents who work in, for example, the field of nursing care for what he and I would regard as unsocial hours? The child care arrangements available at those unsocial hours do not currently qualify for assistance under the working families tax credit. Will he examine the case of that small but important group and see whether some assistance can be provided?

Mr. Smith: I shall certainly examine that case. I should point out that, through our national child care strategy, a huge expansion in child care provision is under way, stimulated not least by the provisions of the working families tax credit. However, as I said, I undertake to look at the point the right hon. Gentleman raises.

The improvements I have described and their impact on tackling child poverty and helping working families will be reinforced by further improvements to public services that will be made, thanks to our commitment to average real growth in health spending of more than 6 per cent. a year over the next four years—the longest period of sustained high growth in expenditure in the history of the national health service. The immediate boost of £2 billion for health this year is in part funded by the real increase in tobacco duties set out in clauses 12 to 15.

The Conservatives' decision not to vote for the tobacco tax provides further confirmation that their sums do not add up and that they could not deliver on Labour's pledges on health and education.

Our additional boost of £1 billion for education this year is accompanied by the introduction in clause 57 of a new training relief for employees. It will make employers' contributions to education or training undertaken by holders of individual learning accounts exempt from tax and national insurance where they qualify for grant or discount and are available to all employees on similar terms.

Businesses and jobs will benefit from our commitment to enterprise. We have already cut main and small business rates of corporation tax to their lowest-ever levels—the lowest of any major industrialised country. The Bill contains several measures designed further to promote enterprise and help business. Those include the cuts in capital gains tax in clause 37; the research and development tax credits in clauses 67 and 68; the permanent 40 per cent. capital allowances for small and medium-sized enterprises in clause 69, which will help manufacturing businesses in particular; the new all-employee share ownership plan in clause 47; the enterprise management incentives in clause 61, which will help high-risk companies recruit key personnel; and the corporate venturing provisions in clause 62.

Those measures have been widely welcomed by business. Together with the introduction in the Budget of three-year, 100 per cent. capital allowances for investment in information and communications technology equipment and an extra £100 million for the new £1 billion target umbrella fund for regional enterprise growth, they comprise a huge commitment to business success on the part of a Government who believe that enterprise must go hand in hand with fairness.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The Chief Secretary makes great play of the tax breaks that have been given to business, but will he tell us what the overall burden on business of the changes in business taxation since 1997 has been?

Mr. Smith: We have been helping businesses to invest, expand and create an enterprise culture in this country. Let me quote the Institute of Directors news release commenting on the Budget. It states:

> The Institute of Directors welcomes the pro-enterprise flavour of the Budget, coinciding with the Institute's own recommendations. The cut in capital gains tax on business assets, plus the moves to encourage wider employee shareholding, will be a welcome boost to enterprise. We are delighted to see businesses being encouraged to seize the opportunities offered by e-commerce, where moving quickly will have a big effect on our international competitiveness.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The right hon. Gentleman was referring to the regional dimension of creating new businesses. He will be aware that in the areas that are lucky enough to be getting objective 1 status—Cornwall, South Yorkshire, Merseyside and a good part of Wales—there is concern about the adequacy of finance during this financial year, whatever happens in the comprehensive spending review, to enable advantage to be taken of the opportunity to create development funds of the sort that have already been created on Merseyside. Is he able to give an assurance that if it is found in the areas to which I have referred—I am obviously concerned about Wales—that there is a need for more than the £25 million in our budget under the Barnett formula for meeting the European and match funding aspects of objective 1, he will be able to go to the contingency reserve, given that he has a good reserve, and help us out if need be?

Mr. Smith: As the Government have said on a number of occasions, we fully appreciate the importance of objective 1 status for west Wales and the valleys and the regions within England, which are benefiting from it. The Administration in Wales have stated that the money this year is adequate to get the programme started. I have said many times that the future is properly a matter for the spending review. Anyone who has tangled with these issues will realise that they are of some complexity.

It is a mark of our recognition of the importance of objective 1 status for west Wales, the valleys and Wales as a whole that it is being dealt with in the spending review. Full consideration will be given to how the funds and the public expenditure cover can be provided to ensure that the programme goes ahead. We realise its importance for the regeneration of parts of Wales and for regions in England as well.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): Bearing in mind the Bill's positive aspects for business, will the right hon. Gentleman tell us whether the tax burden on business has increased or decreased since the 1997 general election?

Mr. Smith: I have recently pointed to a string of ways in which tax on business is falling. Moreover, there are measures in the Budget that will encourage business to invest further by extending reliefs, which have been widely welcomed throughout industry, by its representative organisations and by individual firms. We shall take no lectures on business from Opposition Members, who presided over the two deepest recessions since world war two, which resulted in the decimation of business, with hundreds of thousands of firms going bust and 1 million jobs lost in manufacturing industry. That must be contrasted with the stability, sound finances and prospects of business growth that we now have.

I must make progress on the Bill itself. The new optional ring-fenced regime in clause 81 is another measure that will help business.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Would my right hon. Friend be interested to know that when tax and borrowing are put together as a share of gross domestic product—in other words, what the Government are spending on behalf of the public—they were 38.2 per cent. in 1996–97, and are due to decrease to 36.4 per cent. in 2000–01? That is a difference of about £17 billion, or an extra 7p on income tax. As Baroness Thatcher has pointed out, at the end of the day all business tax is paid by individuals. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the burden of tax on business and everybody else is decreasing under the Government?

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful intervention. He always makes interesting observations on our proceedings. I welcome them, even when they involve quoting the baroness.

[Mr. Smith]

I was referring to clause 81, which will introduce the so-called tonnage tax regime, whereby shipping companies can opt to work out taxable profits on the basis of the tonnage of ships operated. This innovation, which I know a number of my hon. Friends and Opposition Members have called for, and which follows Lord Alexander's inquiry, is part of the Government's commitment to encourage the British shipbuilding industry and will, I am sure, be welcomed.

The Bill modernises the tax treatment of corporate groups and international operations. Clause 96 extends group relief to UK branches of non-resident companies. Clause 100 enables groups to bring together chargeable gains and allowable losses on asset disposals, without having to go through the rigmarole of transferring asset ownership within the group. Clause 103 improves the fairness and the effectiveness of anti-avoidance rules for controlled foreign companies.

I shall say a word about the Budget provisions in clause 102, which limit the use of so-called mixer companies to shelter low-taxed foreign profits from UK tax. It is important to understand that under the old rules, the UK taxpayer is currently underwriting the cost to business of investing in countries that have not reduced their tax to the UK level. In that sense, our changes promote international tax competition. Perhaps even more important, they level the playing field among groups that invest directly from the UK and those that adopt mixing structures.

Taken together, our measures align tax treatment with economic rationality, tackle avoidance, and help sustain the United Kingdom as a competitive base for international operations.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Is that why the Inland Revenue consulted for a long period on enshrining the previous regime?

Mr. Smith: There has been extensive consultation about the regime from which these changes result. The changes have been widely welcomed—there has been criticism but there has also been a substantial welcome—and they make the United Kingdom a more attractive base for international and multinational operations.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Can the right hon. Gentleman name three groups that have welcomed the measure?

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Labour Back Benchers, for one.

Mr. Smith: Labour Back Benchers certainly welcome the measure. I was at a post-Budget breakfast where an array of luminaries commented on the Budget. The measures which, for example, avoid the need to transfer assets before pooling chargeable gains and losses were welcomed. I shall be happy to send the hon. Gentleman details.

Mr. Jack: If the measure is supposed to increase the competitiveness of UK companies in terms of their overseas investments, can he explain why I have received no representation from any UK overseas investor pointing out that his tax bill will be lower by virtue of the Government's proposals?

Mr. Smith: The package of measures does make the UK more competitive. If people write to the right hon. Gentleman, they are far more likely to do so when they have something to complain about than when they have something to praise in the Budget.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford) *rose—*

Mr. Smith: I have given way sufficiently.

The Bill will also help us meet our international commitments to the environment. Following last year's Budget, the Bill is an important part of the largest-ever package of environmental tax measures to be introduced in the United Kingdom. Clause 30 introduces the climate change levy. Clauses 20 to 23 reform vehicle excise duty for cars. Clause 58 fundamentally reforms company car taxation, providing an incentive for low CO_2 emissions and removing the perverse incentive for drivers to clock up business mileage simply to reach more generous thresholds.

Clauses 136 and 137 increase the landfill tax rate and clarify liability. Moreover, the changes to the affordable warmth programme in clause 78 and the reduced rate of VAT on the installation of energy saving materials and on the grant-funded installation of heating systems for which clause 131 provides will help ensure that pensioners feel the benefit of warmer homes and cheaper fuel bills as well as that of the £150 winter allowance. The programme takes forward the Government's commitment to combating fuel poverty by supporting the installation of energy efficient central heating systems and insulation. It will benefit up to 1 million low-income homes.

The affordable warmth programme will be funded through a public-private partnership with commercial lessors. Capital allowances will reduce the cost of leasing and allow the scheme to reach many more households than would otherwise be possible. Those provisions, taken with the Budget announcements of an incentive for ultra low sulphur petrol, the aggregates levy and the consultation on stamp duty relief for brownfield developments, make this a Finance Bill for the environment as well as for working families and enterprise.

The Bill also backs charitable giving. Clauses 38 to 46 implement our radical package of measures to boost donations to charities and improve the operation of the tax system for charities. The Bill abolishes the minimum limit on tax relief for donations, boosts payroll giving through the three-year, 10 per cent. Government supplement and abolishes the maximum limit on donations.

Clause 40 cuts red tape on corporate donations. The Bill also introduces new income tax reliefs on gifts of shares and securities, frees charities from the need to set up subsidiaries for small trading and fundraising ventures, and broadens the VAT zero rate for the sale or hire of donated goods. It is a good package, which is widely welcomed by charities. Simon Hebditch of the Charities Aid Foundation described the provisions as radical. He estimated that they would mean £350 million extra a year in tax relief.

Together with our on-going consultation on the establishment of a network of children's funds, our measures on charities show how Britain can make the most of one of our greatest strengths: the readiness of our people to give so much of their time and money through voluntary and community activity for the benefit of all.

The Bill promotes enterprise and fairness. It looks to the future while the Conservative party remains locked in the past. It shows the Government keeping their promises, whereas the Conservative Government broke theirs. Labour stands for the many as we provide sound public finances, low inflation, higher living standards, help for working families and pensioners and employment opportunities for all. By contrast, today's increasingly extreme Conservative party makes reckless tax pledges for the few. Those policies would deny health and education investment for the many, and return Britain to the bad old days of boom and bust.

The Bill means more enterprise, opportunity and fairness in a Britain that is better off with Labour. I commend it to the House.

4.59 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I beg to move, To leave out from 'That' to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Finance Bill because its 558 pages impose more complex regulations, introduce further taxes and fail to reverse the increasing burdens of taxation on families, on homeowners, on motorists, on consumers, on savers and on businesses.'

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury omitted to mention one of the records that the Bill breaks: it is the longest Finance Bill that the House has had to consider. It runs to 558 pages in two volumes. It will cost any member of the public £27.40.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Not yet. The Bill begins encouragingly by stating that it conforms to the European convention on human rights.

Mr. Andrew Smith: For the record, the right hon. Gentleman should accept that the Bill is 54 clauses shorter than that which the Conservatives introduced in 1996.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That is a wholly bogus way in which to measure the length of the Bill because volume II and half of volume I are made up of schedules. It is not difficult to cut the number of clauses if the number of schedules is increased. This is easily the longest Bill so it is not surprising that the Institute of Chartered Accountants spokesman said:

This is out of all proportion to anything we have seen before . . . I do not know how ordinary people have a hope of understanding their tax affairs. Even accountants are struggling.

There is a democratic point: the public and taxpayers should at least understand the taxes that they are asked to pay, even if they do not approve of them. Apart from that, the Bill's sheer baffling complexity and length is bad for business because an arbitrary, illogical and complex tax and benefits system creates a national overhead of unavoidable costs that all businesses and taxpayers have to bear.

Instead of boasting about the temporary Budget surplus, which has largely been achieved through three tax-raising Budgets, the Chief Secretary should attend much more closely to the economy's long-term productive capacity, on which we shall have to rely to pay for our public services long after the Budget surplus has disappeared. That productive potential is being eroded and undermined by the Bill, which is particularly damaging when combined with the ever higher tax burden being levied on taxpayers and businesses of all sorts.

The Chief Secretary was coy when my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) asked a straight question about the additional burden on business. The Confederation of British Industry Budget briefing refers to

the increase in the business tax burden which we have estimated at over £20 billion over the five years of this parliament.

It would be helpful if the Chief Secretary could confirm that that figure is correct.

The argument about whether the Government have broken their pre-election promises not to increase the tax burden has, in essence, been settled. Before the Budget, the Prime Minister's personal press officer, Mr. Campbell, let the cat out of the bag, or reaffirmed what the rest of the country knew: the tax burden has increased sharply since the election and, at the end of this Parliament, will be substantially higher than at the start.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Following my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary about the combination of borrowing and tax, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the global level of borrowing and tax has decreased? Will he support the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, who has called for the Tories to introduce a borrowing guarantee, which would reveal the high borrowing and tax levels that the right hon. Gentleman oversaw?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman has it all wrong again. I refer him to the Government's own Budget document, which clearly states on page 200 that the tax burden has risen, continues to rise and will be higher at the end of this Parliament. If he does not believe the Government's literature, no wonder he is in denial on the tax burden. The arithmetic is absolutely clear, but the Government have invented a new trick: a hypothetical average family that pays no indirect tax at all, spends no money and does not drive, smoke, drink, insure anything or move house. That family, supposedly, now has a lower tax burden. Perhaps he was referring to that.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I will finish the point first.

The worst of it is that the Government have put their claim about a lower tax burden on this "typical family" in a propagandist leaflet, printed and distributed at public expense, which gives an entirely misleading and one-sided view of the Budget. I am glad to say that the Select Committee on the Treasury—whose distinguished Chairman is present—has pointed out that that is in itself a misleading way of portraying what is happening in regard to taxation. The Committee rightly suggests that if

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the Government repeat that bit of propaganda at state expense, it should be independently audited by an outside body.

Mr. Jack: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford), as I promised.

Kali Mountford: I hoped that the right hon. Gentleman would further develop his theme of productivity, which I thought made an interesting beginning to his speech. I agree with him that productivity is the best way forward. Does he agree with me that the families to whom he refers benefit most when they work, and does he not welcome the injection of 800,000 new jobs into the economy on which our success should be based?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall return explicitly to that point. I shall also return to the way in which the Government are eroding the competitiveness that they inherited from their predecessor.

Mr. Jack: Before my right hon. Friend leaves the subject of disclosure, may I ask whether he has ever got to the bottom of the facts that lie behind the unwillingness of the present Treasury team to answer a question first tabled in 1981 by the now right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw)? Each year, the right hon. Gentleman sought to put on record the full effect of the Government's tax proposals, both indirect and direct. Has my right hon. Friend ever been given a reason for the fact that that information is not now made available to us?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: It would be highly embarrassing. That is not a very good reason, but it is the real reason. As my right hon. Friend may know, the Treasury Committee drew attention to the deficiency and called for the Government to make the calculation again, as we always did—my right hon. Friend was part of our Treasury team—so that the public could know exactly what was happening to the tax burden on families of all sorts.

Mr. Bercow: Is it not significant that the Bill will do nothing to change the fact that taxes are rising but, at one and the same time, class sizes are bigger, waiting lists are longer, police numbers are smaller, the plight of agriculture is more and not less severe, and the transport system is more and not less congested? Is that not proof positive that under the present Government we get rotten services at rip-off prices?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we pay more taxes, and services are getting worse. What is happening to all the money is a complete mystery. It must be going into some black hole in the Treasury.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I will give way once more, but then I must move on.

Mr. Leslie: Why did the right hon. Gentleman say on Sky News on 22 March that the increases in health spending were "unwise and irresponsible"?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong. I did not say that the increases were unwise in any way; I said that the mechanism for taking the increase in public expenditure outside the comprehensive spending review mechanism was unwise.

It was the Chancellor himself who said, in last year's Budget statement, that in no circumstances would he unravel a three-year expenditure commitment until the end of that three year period. So why—I think I know the answer to this question; I think the reasons are entirely political—have the Government, in the middle of that period, lurched into an uncomprehensive spending review, doling out a bit of money here and a bit of money there before the spending review period ends in July this year? That is the question that I asked on the television programme, and I was right to ask it.

What we already see in the Bill is a picture of not just higher taxes but more taxes, and more complicated taxes. The best illustration is the new energy tax—the so-called climate change levy to which the Chief Secretary referred. As the more alert Government Back Benchers will know by now, the tax does a great deal of damage to manufacturing industries, especially those that are exposed to international competition. It is also completely unnecessary. The reductions in carbon dioxide emissions could be achieved at a fraction of the cost by many other means. Earlier this afternoon, we heard that the moratorium on gas-fired generation is to be removed. If that is the case, that will be a better, more efficient and cheaper way in which to achieve the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

It is an unnecessary tax in another sense. Only certain industries will be able to negotiate rebates; that privilege will be given only to certain sectors of British industry. What should concern the House is that the rebates will be agreed not by the House, or even by Ministers, but by civil servants, so we are, in effect, asked to delegate to civil servants the right to tax.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Will the hon. Gentleman forgive me? I shall make a little more progress.

The main point about the energy tax is its sheer complexity. I declare an interest. I am a company director and will be affected by that part of the Bill, but I am in good company. Every other business in the country, of whatever size, will have to pay the tax.

Schedule 6, which brings in the energy tax, runs to 83 pages, so every business in the country, from ICI to the corner shop, must somehow make sense of a schedule running to that length. It is not just the length of it, but the language. Almost at random, I picked out the following provision. I have mentioned electricity rebates. They are to be calculated by treatment of supply

> as a reduced-rate supply to the extent (if any) that the exempt renewable supplies made by the supplier in the averaging period would have been reduced-rate supplies if they had not been made on the basis that they were exempt.

I defy anyone to make sense of such a provision. It is pure gobbledegook, but everyone will have to understand it. Everyone will have to calculate that ludicrous and unnecessary levy, and that example was pulled out at random.

The tax is complicated, unnecessary and damaging. There are many other examples.

Mr. Andrew Smith: Is the Conservative party prepared to repeal it, then?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: We are absolutely committed to meeting the Kyoto target for carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions. We will not support a tax that does it in an entirely unnecessary and damaging way. We will fight the tax to the Report stage, when it comes back to the House and beyond that. We are adamantly and completely against unnecessary and complex taxation on that scale.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No. I will not give way again.

What we get from the Government is all the waffle about working with business—all the talk of partnership. Partnership is the word of the moment, but their idea of partnership is similar to that of the black widow spider. Zoologists in the House will know that it gets what it wants and then the partner is dead—like the British motor industry, as it is discovering to its cost. I shall not discuss the goings-on at the Department of Trade and Industry—they are almost beyond parody—the farcical attempts at a competition policy, the substantial withdrawal of the Utilities Bill, or the goings-on over Rover, but the point is that the Treasury has adopted the same attitude towards business.

As the House will remember, last year, the Treasury smuggled out a proposed change to the self-employed status of those working in so-called service companies: IR35. Instead of announcing it on Budget day, or in the Budget speech, the change appeared in the 35th press release: that is why it is called IR35. It is highly and hugely damaging to the British high-tech labour market.

It is therefore not surprising that the British Chambers of Commerce has added the cost of IR35 to its burden barometer. It calculates—it gets its figures from the Government's regulatory impact assessments—that the cumulative regulatory burden on British industry over this Parliament totals just over £10 billion. That is a terrifying indictment of the Government's attitude towards industry.

Dr. Palmer: In view of the right hon. Gentleman's strictures on IR35, will he explain why the Conservative party did not divide the House when the matter came up at the end of the Budget debate? Will he give a commitment that a Conservative Government would repeal it?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Perhaps we took the Government at their word when they said that they were reviewing and consulting on IR35. In retrospect, we were wrong to do so. Not only have the employees concerned been let down; we have been betrayed by Government assurances that they wish to work with businesses. Yes, we shall be opposing the clauses that seek to implement IR35.

Kali Mountford: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, having given way to her already, I should like to make some progress.

Following IR35 last year, the Government are in this Finance Bill attacking controlled foreign companies and double-taxation relief, to which the Chief Secretary referred. The trouble is that, although that was cooked up in the Treasury, people in the accountancy profession know a great deal more about the matter and have shown that the cost to British industry will not be the £300 million in the Budget document but many billions of pounds.

As Governments all over the world are discovering, if a tax jurisdiction is run to the detriment of internationally mobile businesses, such businesses simply disappear. Perhaps that is how the Government square their arithmetic. Perhaps the small additional revenue is because the companies concerned will leave the country and not pay tax at all. Is that what the Government really understand by a partnership with British industry? I want confirmation from the Government this afternoon: will they proceed with such damaging proposals or will they withdraw them? We need an answer because the very uncertainty is damaging.

There is an important wider issue. The Government inherited from us three years ago a world-class economy. People came here to do business; we were a magnet to global business. That is not a permanent state of grace; it has to be worked at and kept in repair. The Government simply do not understand that one cannot run a taxation policy without regard to such wider global dimensions. The Government's little Englander approach on tax is unsustainable. I shall give the House another example.

Let us consider excise duties. The Government's endless increase in hydrocarbon fuel, alcohol and tobacco duties has at last, in one sense, been stopped. They have at last ended the fuel escalator of 6 per cent. in real terms, but the damage has already been done. Those of us on the Opposition Benches cannot be the only ones who receive letters from haulage firms that have been made uncompetitive—at least in European terms.

More than that, we are losing revenue. Instead of filling up in this country, vehicles do so in Calais. Not only are the Government undermining the British haulage industry, they are losing revenue. They have cheated on that, too. The Chancellor said in his Budget speech that he was going to increase road fuel duty only in line with inflation. He did not, however, say that he had changed the definition. Rather than increasing the duty in line with actual inflation, he is now predicting an inflation rate of 3.4 per cent. When we were in office, we always used an actual inflation rate. Now, the Government are using a predicted inflation rate, of 3.4 per cent. This year, that change will net the Treasury an extra £500 million.

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

Therefore, even when the Government come off the fuel escalator, as we have been demanding, they cannot resist pocketing an extra £500 million.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I have noticed that the Chancellor has been using that 3.4 per cent. inflation rate. However, I thought that the Government's policy was never to allow inflation to exceed 2.5 per cent.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Exactly; I think that we are owed an explanation. The Chancellor said in his Budget speech that the duty will increase in line with inflation. He has an inflation target of 2.5 per cent. Why is the duty increasing by 3.4 per cent? My right hon. Friend has asked a good question, to which we need an answer.

Mr. Gardiner: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I shall give way one more time.

Mr. Gardiner: Does the right hon. Gentleman not know—if he does know, will he not accept—that different sectors of the economy have different inflation rates? Specifically, when he talks of inflation in the health service, he carefully does not use the same inflation rate that he uses when talking about the retail prices index.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That is one of the feeblest explanations that I have heard. I think that we should all expect a slightly more convincing explanation from Ministers.

The point that I wish to raise now is the excise duty increases on beer and tobacco. Smuggling of those products has become an epidemic. The Government's own figures show that more than one in five of the cigarettes smoked in the United Kingdom are smuggled in, and that 80 per cent. of the hand-rolling tobacco smoked here is similarly illegally imported. The Government have said in their own review document that

> Smuggling is on a strong upward trend.

Last year, revenue from tobacco decreased by £2.5 billion. The Government say that they want to give some extra money from that source to the health service. It is just as well that they were not planning to do it last year. If they had, this year, there would be a cut in the allocation to the national health service budget.

The Revenue is being undermined, and so is the health strategy. Smoking is on the increase, particularly among young people. Moreover, the trade is now being taken over by criminal gangs, who are selling in uncontrolled outlets. The Government—or at least the Home Office—lectures the licensed trade about responsible drinking and tobacconist shops about not selling tobacco to minors, but, because of their own excise duty policy, they are undermining that legitimate trade.

We therefore have a failed tax policy, a failed health policy and a failed crime policy. What are the Government doing about it? They are increasing the duty on tobacco products by another 5 per cent. in real terms, making a bad situation worse. That is what we mean by saying that the Government are pursuing a little-Englander tax policy, in defiance of the logic of the single market in Europe.

Mr. Martin Taylor was commissioned by the Government to report on that very subject. His report has never been published. Why? It is leaked that the report has not been published because Mr. Taylor drew the obvious conclusion that, if we are to tackle the smuggling epidemic, we must tackle the cause—which is the wide and growing duty differential between the United Kingdom and the continent. The Government will never solve the smuggling problem until they recognise that fact and do something about it. However, Mr. Taylor's report—which is too embarrassing to publish—has simply been suppressed.

The Government, rather than tackling that cause of crime, will try to tackle the crime itself by deploying another 1,000 Customs and Excise officers. I tell the Government that that will simply not work unless and until the Treasury recognises the logic of the single market in Europe. We will not agree to the duty increases until the Government not just commission, but publish an independent study into the causes and consequences of the smuggling epidemic.

There are plenty of other examples of how the Government are defying the international tax facts of life, such as stamp duty on shares. We read that the London stock market may merge with the German stock market. That will be handicapped and undermined unless the Government take seriously the problem of us having stamp duty on share transactions and the Germans not having it. Equally, everyone knows that many people bet on horses through telephone or internet betting in a jurisdiction with no betting tax. The Government have refused to face up to the problem, or even to study it.

We created a low-tax jurisdiction in this country. That is part of the golden economic legacy that the Government are demolishing. They—or rather the country—will pay the price of lost revenue, lost business and, because of their efforts to shore up the tax system, increased regulations and complexity.

The Government's answer to everything is more officials, more rules and more civil servants. Maybe that helps to answer a question that one of my hon. Friends asked earlier: what is happening to all the extra tax money? It cannot be just Conservative Members who are asked that. When people are paying all those extra taxes, they want to know why public services are not only not getting better, but getting worse? Why do people now have to join a waiting list to get on a waiting list to see a consultant? We now have at least part of the answer. The cost of central Government has risen under this Government by £2 billion a year. In case the Government are inclined to dispute that, it is spelled out in the Budget documents.

Mr. Leslie: Where?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman need only go to the Vote Office, get out Command Paper 4601 and turn to page 60, where he will find helpfully laid out the gross administrative expenditure by Department. If he glances at the bottom line, he will see that the cost of

central Government was flat in our last three years. Since then, it has risen by £2 billion a year. That is the cost of a Labour Government.

Mr. Leslie *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. He is taking issue with a document produced by his own Government. It is all here in black and white—an extra £2 billion a year. There may be no more policemen in our constituencies, but there are more special advisers in Government Departments. There may not be enough nurses in the NHS, but there are plenty of politicians in it, and they are all being paid for out of that extra £2 billion a year.

We have got to the secret in the Bill. Among all the verbiage, all the extra schedules and all its 500 pages, the truth is that it is a summary—practically an embodiment—of the Government. It taxes more and delivers less. That is why we shall oppose it.

5.29 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): The Treasury Select Committee report is tagged to this debate, so I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I say something about it. In the Budget debate, I warmly welcomed the measures proposed, including the increases in health and education spending, the working families tax credit, child benefit and winter fuel allowances. I repeat that welcome this afternoon, particularly because the measures have strong support in my constituency, which, as hon. Members will know, is in Labour's heartlands.

I want to speak in my role as Chairman of the Treasury Committee.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Radice: I have hardly said a word yet.

Mr. Davies: That is precisely why I wanted to intervene now: I do not want to throw the right hon. Gentleman off when he has got into his stride—not that it is easy to do that. As Chairman of the Treasury Committee, will he note that paragraph 25 of the Committee's report on the Budget explicitly confirms the point that I put to the Chief Secretary, which he refused to acknowledge and tried to run away from? It says:

there will be a discretionary loosening of the fiscal stance in each financial year over the period 2000-01 to 2003-04 . . .

Is it not extraordinary that a Labour Chief Secretary refuses to acknowledge the clear, explicit conclusion of a Treasury Committee with a majority of Labour members?

Mr. Radice: I shall come to that point in a moment. The role of the Treasury Committee is not to provide opposition to the Government—which many political commentators think that we should do, because the official Opposition are not making much of a fist of it—but to make Ministers and civil servants open, transparent and accountable. That is what we try to do.

This is our third report on the Budget in this Parliament, and our fifth report this Session. We congratulate the Government on the effectiveness of the pre-Budget report process as an aid to openness and consultation. The Government consulted on the 12 measures in the pre-Budget report, and all are in the Bill. Some changes have resulted from the consultation. That, I believe, is open government in action.

We also congratulate the Government on "Analysing UK Fiscal Policy". That document is a useful background paper on which both supporters and critics of Government policy have drawn heavily. The Government have been questioned on their fiscal stance precisely because people have been able to read that document and see how the calculations are done. We asked the Government to show the distributional effects of the Budget. There are gains for families, but we would have liked the Government to go further and display the impact on all households.

I want to return to that hoary annual—the tax burden. Table 5 in our report showed clearly that, taking into account the Budget, the pre-Budget and last year's Budget, taxes are falling. The figure for the tax burden—the tax take as a percentage of gross domestic product—depends on whether we count working families tax credit as a tax. If we do—and the Government's preferred measure, the net tax and social security contributions, does—the burden falls between 1998–99 and 2000–01. If we do not count the working families tax credit, and use the measure of current receipts, which are in the Red Book, the tax burden rises.

To put that in context, and bearing in mind the presence of the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), his plan in the November 1996 Budget was for taxes to rise higher, on the measure of net taxes and social security contributions, in 1999–2000 and 2000–01, than is predicted in the most recent Budget.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Did my right hon. Friend agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the former Chancellor, when he described borrowing as deferred taxation in an earlier Budget debate? If we take borrowing and taxation together, that clearly shows that levels of taxation have gone down. If we were at the same level as in 1996-97, we would have had to raise income tax by 7p.

Mr. Radice: That is an interesting theory.

Mr. Davies: It is a fact.

Mr. Radice: To put it more charitably, it is an interesting way of looking at the issue. It is also legitimate, and I have no objection to different ways of calculating the tax burden as long as they are laid out in the Red Book, as they are.

The working families tax credit is not counted as tax, according to present accounting conventions. However, as it is a new scheme and as the plan is to extend it to children and pensioners, in a move to what might be better termed a negative income tax, we say in our report that there is a strong case for reviewing accounting conventions and for considering whether it should be scored in as a tax.

We have not included my next point in our report, but to put the debate in context, the fact is that if one is going to bring down the public sector borrowing requirement, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe did

[Mr. Radice]

and as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has, taxes are bound to go up, as they did under the right hon. and learned Gentleman and—in the case of indirect taxes—in the first two years of this Government. Following on from that, it is obvious that fiscal drag and economic growth put up the tax burden and the tax take as a percentage of GDP. So we should not make such an issue of that point and, in our report, we tried to put it into context. After all, our job as a Select Committee is to try to shed some light on the debate.

If one reads the background document that the Government produced, which analyses fiscal policy, one realises that there is a difference between a relative change and an absolute change. The relative change is the difference between the Budget stance this year and what was forecast in last year's Red Book. The absolute change is the difference between the Budget stance and last year's outturn. On the first measure, we will undoubtedly see fiscal tightening in 2000–01 and 2001–02, but on the second measure we will see what Kate Barker of the CBI, who gave evidence before our Committee, described as a "slight loosening" in 2000–01 compared with 1999–2000.

The question then arises of whether we can afford the increase in public spending that has taken place. My answer is yes, because since 1996–97 we have experienced a 4.2 per cent. tightening, which is the equivalent of £40 billion. The public finances are unquestionably in good shape. The further question arises of whether the fiscal stance is supporting the monetary policy. It is on that issue that some City economists and the IMF have raised some questions, although they have been a matter more of qualification than of outright criticism. If one accepts that some loosening has occurred, it has only been very marginal. Indeed, the Monetary Policy Committee did not change interest rates in March or April. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, the deputy Governor of the Bank of England believed that the impact of the Budget on monetary policy was slight.

The debate was best summed up by Peter Riddell in *The Times*. Likening it to the question of whether a glass was half full or half empty, he pointed out that the relaxation was very small—much less than the tightening that happened each year since 1997, which the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, the former Chancellor, has described as too severe. That perhaps sets the matter in context.

Mr. Edward Davey: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the specialist advisers to the Select Committee said that fiscal policy was not supporting monetary policy and that it was going in the other direction?

Mr. Radice: Some did, some did not: like special advisers everywhere, their opinions were divided. A slight divergence between fiscal and monetary policies may not be that important, and I assume that that is why the deputy Governor said that the Budget's impact on monetary policy was slight. We should probably heed his voice even more than the voices of our advisers—but that may be unfair to everyone involved.

The Select Committee report shows that fast growth has been combined with low inflation, and that the public finances are still in good shape. It supports the idea of setting an inflation target for the Monetary Policy Committee of 2.5 per cent., which should be the MPC's prime objective. It is concerned about the strength of sterling and its impact on manufacturing—as anyone who studies the situation must be—but believes that most of that strength is due to the weakness of the euro, rather than to anything that the Government or the MPC have done, and that the problem may right itself over the next 18 months or so.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Did the Select Committee support the Liberal Democrat party's alternative Budget, whose main proposal was that income tax should be raised by 1p, regardless of the level inherited?

Mr. Radice: I do not think that the Committee considered the proposal. No doubt we would have considered it if it had been brought to our attention.

The Select Committee's report found that the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee must take into account the exchange rate when coming to a decision about inflation. That is very sensible.

In conclusion, some commentators—usually in newspapers that are hostile to the Government—have said that the Select Committee report is critical of the Government. However, although Labour Members form the majority in the Committee and the rest of its membership comes from Opposition parties, it broadly supports the Government's economic policy.

5.43 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I begin by declaring a personal interest to the House. Not only do I pay income tax, smoke, drive a car and occasionally have a drink, but I am also, as the Register of Members' Interests shows, a non-executive director of four limited companies in this country. Those companies are affected by various proposals in the Bill. I do not think that that marks me out particularly, as almost every company in this country is likely to be adversely affected by the Budget. The Budget statement and the Bill show that the Government's claims to be business friendly are looking very frayed indeed.

The Government took over a very good economic environment for the real economy—we had striven to enable British companies to make themselves competitive in global markets. At times, the Government's positively anti-business stance has steadily undermined that, as I think that this debate will make clear.

The Budgets and resulting Finance Bills produced by the Government are difficult to penetrate. I accept that the process has never been totally comprehensible to ordinary members of the public. However, we always answered embarrassing parliamentary questions. We acknowledged when we were increasing taxation and when we were reducing it. We produced the fiscal judgment in a clear and comprehensible form, and we exposed ourselves to criticism, sometimes on that account.

Budget speeches, as given by the Chancellor, are extremely uninformative and, quite often, misleading. They are short political speeches. The Red Book is completely obscure, and much parliamentary questioning is straightforwardly avoided if the result is to give an embarrassing answer. The Finance Bill itself is quite enormous. I remember how we struggled to move towards

expressing a Bill in plain English, and to ensure that the drafting was such that it would eventually produce shorter Bills. The only thing that is clear from the front page of this Bill is that it apparently complies with the European convention on human rights—unless accountants have any claim, through being required to pick up heavy loads. The thing is utterly incomprehensible and impenetrable to ordinary members of the public, and it does not shed much light on what the Government will do.

I said that the climate for business was worsened by this. The overall effect of the Budget is to carry on the Government's policy of increasing the burden of taxation. The Government have increased the overall burden of taxation on most ordinary families, although I accept that families on low pay, probably with a single parent, have benefited. They have also increased the tax burden on business, and are continuing to do so. What is most alarming, when one looks at the judgment behind the Budget, is that the Government almost certainly intend to continue increasing the tax burden on both the public and business.

We have reached a stage where the economy is recovering from a near-recession at the end of 1998 and early 1999, and recovering quite strongly. The Government boast that there was no recession; they are extremely lucky to be able to make that boast. We had six months in which there was no growth at all, but we did not have the two successive quarters of negative growth that most people were anticipating.

Recovery is now quite strong, but business is facing substantial difficulties. One is the tax burden; another is the mounting pile of red tape and bureaucracy that all sectors of business face. Another difficulty, on which the Budget and Finance Bill have a bearing, is the excessive strength of the pound. We are plainly going to have a floating exchange rate for the next two or three years at least. The exchange rate has floated upwards to a quite unpredictable level, and no one expected to see that. When I was Chancellor, the pound was usually at DM2.50 against the German currency. Much of British manufacturing and agriculture and many British exporters find the present exchange rate of DM3.25 quite insupportable. It is no good the Chancellor lecturing us about the need to raise productivity to cope with the strength of the pound. I accept that a strong currency has a beneficial effect on encouraging people to raise productivity, but one cannot possibly raise productivity to cope with the extraordinary increase in the value of the pound. Therefore, we must consider what the Government's tax and fiscal policies are likely to do to the exchange rate.

I challenge the frightful hand-wringing about the exchange rate, sometimes from the Bank of England but equally strongly from the Government. It is no good saying that one understands how much many parts of the country and many sections of business are suffering because of the strong pound, if one implies in the next breath that, although one is aware of it, there is—sadly—nothing that can be done. I do not agree with that.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I am most grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. Does he consider that, as our trade with the European Union represents less than 12 per cent. of gross domestic product, it would be more appropriate and significant to consider the strength of the pound relative to the US dollar? For example, will he tell us what the exchange rate with the US dollar was, when he was Chancellor? Would he explain by how much, or—more significantly—by how little, it has changed since then?

Mr. Clarke: I am taken by surprise by my hon. Friend's figure. I suspect that its source lies in some remark made by the present Chancellor; it has the ring of some of his more popular slogans on the tax burden and other matters. Our major market is the EU; it is significant that we have a strong pound. I was steering away from the question of whether we shall continue to have a floating pound, but we should all agree that it is no good going into a state of denial about the damaging effect that that has on farming—in my hon. Friend's constituency and in mine—and on manufacturing across great swathes of the country.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Geraint Davies *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman has already made many interventions; I give way to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale).

Mr. Casale: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Given his well-known pro-European views, what I am about to say does not apply to him. However, does he not despair at the incoherent voices of the Opposition, who berate the pound for being so high and for having a negative effect—supposedly—on manufacturing, while saying that they will never see Britain join the euro, whatever the economic costs?

Mr. Clarke: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not want to draw me into a dispute with any of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I merely point out that, as long as one has a floating pound, it is not sensible to maintain a policy of complete neglect as to its level. That matter must be borne in mind by a Chancellor, when he makes his Budget judgments—as it must be by the governor of the central bank and his colleagues when they make judgments on monetary policy.

Liz Blackman (Erewash) *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I shall make a little more progress; I know which subject I shall be drawn into if I give way.

In any view, the present situation is undoubtedly damaging. People are out of touch with farmers or manufacturers if they do not believe that. It is also quickly producing a deteriorating balance of payments position. Our balance of trade was positive in 1997, but it is now rapidly deteriorating. That, too, has a negative effect on growth and thus a negative effect on our ability to create wealth and to make jobs secure.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: No, I shall not give way.

Behind the Budget lies the question asked by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), in his customary erudite fashion, as to whether the Budget is supporting monetary policy. The extremely tight monetary

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policy maintained by the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England is one of the things that is keeping the pound so high. Our interest rates are almost double those that prevail on the continent. We can see how tight our monetary policy is in real terms when we consider the fact that we have the lowest inflation rate of any member state in the EU. Our real rates are extremely high; that is one reason why the pound is so very strong.

To use the right hon. Gentleman's phrase, does fiscal policy support monetary policy in the Budget? The two must have a relationship, so we would hope that the Chancellor would pursue a fiscal policy that discourages the MPC from making monetary policy any tighter and thus postponing even further the date at which the pound might return to a level that was nearer to trading realities.

The Chancellor can bring down the rate of exchange in two ways. The best way would be for him to stick to his former girl friend, Prudence, and to maintain a prudent fiscal policy—to keep fiscal policy tighter than it might otherwise be—in order to signal to the Bank that it does not need to tighten monetary policy and raise interest rates so fast to keep inflation down.

The worst way would be to have a lax fiscal policy, so that the signal to the markets was that control of the balance between spending and taxation was being lost, that borrowing in the medium to longer term is likely to start to soar and that the rate would be brought down in that way.

At least the Chancellor prefers to talk about the first option, and seems—just about—to be holding to it, in the judgment of the MPC. However, he uses rather meaningless phrases to describe what he has actually done. He overstated the point in the Budget speech. On Budget day—relying, as I did, on the Budget speech—when I heard his descriptions of how the fiscal position was even tighter than it had been in November, I was quite impressed.

However, as has already been revealed, in an intervention from the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and—if one listened carefully—in the speech of the right hon. Member for North Durham, that does not quite stack up when looks at the matter more closely and asks by what comparison the fiscal position is becoming tighter. All the talk of locking in fiscal tightening and prudence turns out to be fairly meaningless, because there is no doubt that, on balance, and especially in the medium to longer-term, the Budget represents a considerable loosening of policy.

The IMF warning was couched quite modestly; it should be taken seriously. It is no good for the Government to wave it away. I applauded what they did just before the Budget. They took a step further towards the policy that I had introduced, on behalf of the previous Conservative Government, of openness on the IMF report. We initiated the policy of exposing the article IV reports by the IMF on British economic management. Just before the Budget, the Chancellor did the same thing and, for the first time, published the complete statement. He was full of pride in that achievement. He stated:

> The publication of the IMF's report on the UK economy clearly demonstrates our commitment to open up the IMF's scrutiny process. Today marks an important step forward by the UK in economic policy making.

The IMF made an extremely sensible comment on the overall effect of the Budget. The IMF plainly believes that fiscal policy no longer wholly supports monetary policy; that also seems to be the conclusion of the Select Committee on the Treasury. Suddenly, the Chancellor is dismissive. He gave a radio interview during which he returned to that meaningless string of phrases—about locking in fiscal discipline and prudence—that he always employs whatever the question, but he has not done that.

To be fair, the immediate outlook is reasonable, if fiscal policy is fairly tight; we are at the stage in the cycle where we are running into a surplus. That was always predictable. The policy of the previous Conservative Government was, first, to reduce the then excessive borrowing and, then, to aim for a policy under which one balanced budgets over the cycle. That is a wholly desirable policy. The Government are running a surplus because they inherited the benefits of that policy. They have roughly maintained the course that was projected; indeed, they have speeded it up slightly—by raising taxation and by underestimating their tax revenues. It looks as though they will run a large surplus for the next year or two. However, the intervention made by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton is unanswerable. Although we are entering that desirable surplus, there is absolutely no doubt that the Budget and the Bill make that surplus smaller and shorter than it would have been.

The right hon. Member for North Durham, on behalf of the Treasury Committee, offered us two ways of considering the matter. The first was the Chancellor's way, in which one made a comparison with his forecast in November. The second way, which the rest of us prefer, would be to compare the situation with what it would have been without the Budget.

The Chancellor fooled me on Budget day; it is true that, compared with his forecasts, the policy looks tighter, but that is because he got his forecast wrong. He had underestimated the revenues that he would produce. He found that revenue was pouring in on a greater scale and he used it—he spent it. The result of the Budget is that the Chancellor has actually loosened policy. The Bank should be looking two years ahead, so members of the Monetary Policy Committee may say, "For the time being, this does not cause us to think about raising interest rates any more than we previously would have done." They should be looking at a two-year time scale—I hope that they are, for the sake of British industry. However, there is absolutely no doubt that, looking further ahead, this is a loosening of policy, and a serious one, because the Government are losing control of public spending.

Under the influence of questioning on the David Frost programme, a well-known consultant who has become a Labour life peer admitted that the Government have abandoned their previous approach to public spending and are producing popular announcements—desirable announcements, which no one can be tempted into opposing—of future levels of expenditure on health, education and transport, with no indication of how they might accommodate those within an overall total of public spending that might make sense in two, three or four years' time.

The difficult question of, "How are you going to fit this in?", is no longer being addressed in the context of a three-year spending review; it is being addressed in the context of, "Do not ask that question. Let us think of

answering that after the next general election, once we have got back. Meanwhile, let us hold out these goodies for the future and see what happens as we go along."

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell) *rose—*

Mr. Radice *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I give way one more time, to the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor).

Mr. Taylor: I very much agree with what the right hon. and learned Gentleman says about fiscal loosening. In view of his kind comments about the Liberal Democrats, it feels unfair to ask the question, but is there not a problem for the Conservative Front-Bench team, given that it has now announced that it will adopt the Government's spending programme—which the right hon. and learned Gentleman has just described—and cut tax on top? Therefore, if there is a problem with fiscal loosening on the Government side, there is undoubtedly one on the Conservative side.

Mr. Clarke: I hope and believe that my party has addressed this subject in the context of a structured approach to public spending. Anyone who makes it one of their objectives to reduce the level of taxation during the life of a Parliament is placing on themselves some constraints when it comes to taking a proper, sensible approach to judging public spending priorities across the board. If one promises to do so, one may face some tight public spending rounds occasionally. If one commits oneself—as we always committed ourselves—to increased spending on health and education, one faces some difficult global choices in other areas, depending on how the economy goes. The Government have given that up entirely.

In July 1998, the Chancellor lectured the House about his structured approach to public spending. He announced the three-year comprehensive spending reviews—of which I, and I think the Liberals, always said, "He will never stick to it. It is not possible. It is all nonsense." However, the Chancellor addressed the subject on a serious basis. He assured us that two things were essential. As he moved, foolishly, from an annual cycle to a three-year cycle, he said, first, that he would stick to it and no new resources would be added during the three years; and secondly, that, when he reached the comprehensive spending review for next three years, any new resources would be conditional on reforms—

money, but only in return for modernisation—[*Official Report*, 14 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 187.].

All that it required was the Frost programme and the Prime Minister in a panic, and both of those rules were abandoned.

Mr. Andrew Smith: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that, even with the additions to expenditure for the last two years of the three-year spending period announced in this Budget, total managed expenditure, on comparable figures, is lower than the amount originally announced in the comprehensive spending review?

Mr. Clarke: I will study that delphic sentence because I suspect that, like many others, it disguises the facts. First, it disguises the fact, which was the basis on which the first announcement was made to the House, that substantial increases in public spending have already been made within the previous three-year period, despite the fact that no modernisation has been delivered—and with no policy on how to achieve any more reform, because the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Committee are working on that and will let us know by June.

The best forecast that I have seen for the three years thereafter, before the comprehensive spending review has started for most Departments, based on what has been announced, is the PricewaterhouseCoopers forecast that total managed spending will rise by 3.7 per cent. a year in real terms over the next four years. That figure is well in advance of any likely growth in the economy, and certainly well above the trend growth that the Government adhere to.

That is why the Chancellor is raising taxes and why, in my opinion, he will continue to do so, especially after the next general election, because, if he carries on like this, he will certainly need to raise taxes after the next election. And he raises the wrong taxes. My party has always called them stealth taxes. Anything that cannot be understood in the hundreds of pages of the Finance Bill is used to raise revenue. He raises taxes on fuel, which went far too high last year, and he has misled a lot of people this year into believing that he has not raised them again. He has made our haulage industry extremely uncompetitive and we are saddled with the highest taxes in Europe.

The taxes on business do particular harm. I shall not discuss the tax arrangements for foreign dividends at length because two companies with which I am involved undoubtedly have an interest, but there is no way in which that change could be described as anything other than unfriendly to British companies doing international business. It was not consulted on properly. No one anticipated that the arrangements for mixing foreign dividends would be re-opened. The Treasury grossly underestimated the impact of the change; it got the likely revenue all wrong. The change will actually raise substantial sums, and I have no doubt that it will emerge that that is having a marked effect on many British companies with an international business. It makes this country, in yet another way, a less attractive place than it was as a base for international companies, makes it less attractive to make overseas investments and places some companies at a competitive disadvantage to international companies based in other countries.

The climate change levy is a disgraceful way of raising revenue, using an environmental cloak. I am all in favour of environmental taxes. We introduced the landfill tax. We were contemplating more. We were so anxious to avoid increasing the burden on business that we always offset any increases by reducing the employer's national insurance contribution. We cut a tax on jobs to relieve a burden on business at the same time as we raised the landfill tax. That has now been abandoned. The climate change levy, the increases in the landfill tax, and the aggregates tax are good little earners for the Treasury. The Government are using them as revenue raisers. They know that they can dress up the revenue raisers with an environmental cloak. As a result, extraordinary damage is being done to industry.

Even the stamp duty changes, which were obviously popular with the Labour party because they seem likely to affect wealthier individuals, have an adverse economic

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effect. One of the things that we need in this country is more mobility. In the new economy, it may be necessary for people to move in and out of, let us say, the south-east of England. The effect of the stamp duty is extraordinary. All the changes to stamp duty on housing since the Government came to power have tripled the stamp duty on houses over £250,000 and quadrupled the stamp duty on house sales of over £500,000. That is just the taxation of envy, and it will have some adverse effects as well.

The likely effect of all this will come home over the next few years, and we shall see an end to prudence. Prudence has not been locked up; Prudence has been let out and is gone and, after the election, from 2002 onwards, the Government will face more difficulties because the Government's economic inheritance will be steadily dissipated.

Mr. Gardiner: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: I am in my last few sentences, so I will not.

The Government are slowly losing control. They took over an improving situation—a good situation. They have not wrecked it, which has surprised the electorate because Labour Governments usually did wreck these things quite quickly, but it is steadily eroding.

The Government are turning into an old tax-and-spend Government after all. At first, they taxed a lot and did not spend very much. Now they are spending more and they will have to tax some more and, as they go along, they keep finding ever more ways of taxing that damage business, and therefore employment and wealth creation. It is tax now, promise to spend later—and perhaps they will sort out how to run a proper macro-economic policy when the time comes if they are still in office in 2002. That is the irresponsibility that lies behind the Budget and this Bill.

6.10 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): I will not be tempted to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the former Chancellor, in his rather rambling speech. Towards its end, he told us that he was rather worried that Prudence was going to be let out. Some Labour Members think that Prudence should occasionally have fun, but we are confident that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, being a good, solid son of a Scottish manse, will ensure that Prudence does not have too much fun. That perhaps sums up the Budget.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman was right to some extent about the strength of sterling, and it is not easy to know what to do about that. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) made the good point that we must also consider the weakness of the euro, but I shall not pursue that point because I want to make a short and boring speech about a small provision in one of the Bill's schedules. However, the euro is in difficulty because of structural problems in Europe. Those problems are not related to inflexible labour markets, but the financial community and those who shift large sums of capital around the world have moved money out of Europe because they see structural problems in Europe and with the euro. They are probably one of the main reasons for money going into the dollar. The Japanese bought far too many euros and burned their fingers doing so. They are moving money out as well, so there are real problems. Of course, the counterpart of the strength of sterling is the weakness of the euro.

I shall be boring and brief as I consider a small provision in the Bill. It is foreshadowed by clause 102, but my point is not about controlled foreign companies so I do not want the Opposition to get excited about that. The clause foreshadows schedule 30, which is as long and rambling—and perhaps even more complex—than the speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe. It is certainly as long and rambling because it deals with a few provisions relating to double taxation relief in its various forms.

I refer briefly to paragraph 4 of schedule 30. I will not say much about it except to point out that the notes on clauses are very helpful. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) guffaws, but paragraphs 8 and 9 of the notes on clause 102 are very helpful. Paragraph 8 states that paragraph 4 of schedule 30 amends two sections of the Taxes Act 1988

> so as to provide for the allowance of credit relief for foreign tax to non-resident persons (companies and individuals) who have branches or agencies in the United Kingdom.

Paragraph 9 of the notes adds:

> In future, credit relief will be available to all non-resident taxpayers with United Kingdom branches or agencies, in respect of taxes paid other than in the taxpayer's home state.

Clause 102 is a consequence of a decision taken by the European Court of Justice. I am glad to see that my hon. Friend the Paymaster General accepts that point even though it is not made clear in the notes on clauses. On 21 September 1999, the court held that a French company that was not resident for tax purposes in Germany—it was resident in France even though it had a branch in Germany—could have the same rights to foreign tax relief as would be given to a German resident company. That sounds boring.

A case was brought by a French company against the German tax authorities, which the court held were acting contrary to European Union treaties because they were deemed to be discriminating against the French national company even though it was not resident in Germany but merely had a branch there. It decided that because the French company had a branch in Germany, it was entitled to have credit for all foreign taxes from all over the world in the same way that a German resident company would. The European Court of Justice considered that the provision upheld by the German tax authorities was discriminatory, so it struck it down.

Several points need to be made about that judgment. First, it gave the lie to the belief—if some people still held to it—that European Union treaties have no jurisdiction over direct taxation, by which I mean income tax and corporation tax. Before the court will act, there must be an infringement of what are described in the treaties as the four freedoms: the freedom of movement of labour, the freedom of capital, the freedom of establishment and the freedom to provide services. The French company was certainly well established in Germany and provided services. Because it operated within the four freedoms of the treaties, it fell within their remit and the court was then able to strike down a tax provision in a member state.

There was no question of the Councils of Ministers making a decision about jurisdiction on tax; no vetoes were used and no directives were made in Brussels. The case is a clear example of a member state's sovereignty on direct taxation being overridden—not just challenged—by the European Court of Justice. Consequently, the Government had to introduce this provision.

This is not an isolated case. I have examined the jurisprudence of all the cases that the court has considered since it examined its first case—one involving France—in 1987. In at least a dozen cases, taxpayers have challenged national tax authorities about their provisions for income tax and corporation tax, and in all but two cases those challenges have been successful. The cases divide more or less equally between those involving income tax and individuals on the one hand and those involving corporation tax and companies on the other. As I said, only two national tax authorities have won their case against a taxpayer.

I do not advise it, but I have read some of the judgments and the opinions of the Advocates General. Some of those opinions are Talmudic in their complexity, but it is clear—we should not be surprised by this—that a European court, the main purpose of which is to secure ever increasing union, has bent over backwards in most cases to try to strike down member states' legislation on direct taxation.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is explaining accurately that treaty obligations do not allow member states to discriminate in their tax laws between nationals or residents of different countries. Indeed, this Government and the previous one have spent much time on that, and the Paymaster General chairs a committee that we joined and that tries to set aside discriminatory tax arrangements for nationals and residents of different states. However, I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman would not join the more unscrupulous campaigners who claim that that means that the European Union has jurisdiction over levels of corporate tax or personal taxation.

Mr. Davies: I shall come to that point shortly. However, the right hon. and learned Gentleman should not assume that it is a side issue of discrimination that can be considered by the committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Paymaster General.

The European Court is not only challenging the sovereignty of the member state; the second consequence of those decisions is that it is challenging the basic cornerstone of income tax and corporation tax—the concept of residence. The court is saying to member states, "Your legislation is based on residence, but if it can be shown that you are discriminating against a non-resident, your law can be struck down." As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, residence is not some quaint little concept dreamed up by we Euro-sceptics to make life difficult for the Commission. The concept of residence lies at the heart of the taxation legislation of all the countries of western and eastern Europe and of the United States of America; more important still, it forms the basis of the hundreds of international double taxation treaties that have been signed since the end of the 1940s.

That is not merely an issue to be examined by a committee. A basic challenge has been thrown down by the court—albeit within the scope of the four freedoms, I concede. With more trade, more people moving around, more establishments in different countries and more provision of services, such cases will arise more often. The court is challenging the whole concept of residence, which lies at the heart of each member state's system of taxation. Let me cite a Dutch professor writing in the 1994 edition—things have moved on since then—of a publication called *The Common Market Law Review*. He went so far as to suggest—I do not subscribe to everything he suggests—that the court's actions could easily result in the disintegration of national tax systems.

That is the argument that has been advanced by many member states—not by Britain, which has been involved in only two such cases, but by France, Germany and Belgium, between which there is a great deal of cross-border trade and movement. The argument has been advanced, not by Euro-sceptics and little Englanders but by the national tax authorities of several European countries, that the court is arrogating the concept of nationality above that of residency by telling member states that they can have their residency rules, but if the court finds that one country is discriminating against a national of another country, nationality becomes more important than residence for the purposes of direct taxation. That is a real clash—not a minor matter, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman attempted to imply in his intervention. A challenge has been made to the very concept of residency and many people are extremely concerned about it.

Mr. Clarke: Is the right hon. Gentleman arguing that within a single market a British Government should be able to discriminate in the treatment under British tax law between companies domiciled in this country and companies domiciled elsewhere in the European Union? We set our rates of corporate and personal taxation, but the European treaties have always ruled out discriminatory provisions which are contrary to the four freedoms. That is not a sensational new discovery. I repeat: the Government whom the right hon. Gentleman supports continue to work within a committee, to which the Government of whom I was a member also contributed, trying to get rid of discriminatory tax provisions—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman that interventions must be brief.

Mr. Davies: With respect, the right hon. and learned Gentleman misses the point. It is a question not of discrimination but of a nation state being unable to provide different tax treatments for residents and non-residents. It has always been accepted in international taxation law and beyond western Europe that countries will provide different tax regimes for residents and non-residents. That has always happened and it still happens, but the European Court says that that is discrimination because the treaties are concerned with nationality, not residence.

Let me return to paragraph 4 of schedule 30. It is not retrospective—it does not apply to previous tax years. Except in that it applies to accounting periods ending on or after Budget day, it is not retrospective for six years. Will an EU-resident individual or company be able to claim six years back from the passage of the Bill for relief

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against foreign taxes, based on the way in which the European Court has decided previous cases? From my reading of the professional journals, I understand that the Inland Revenue has said that if an individual or a company is resident in the EU, that individual or person can claim relief six years back from this legislation—even though the clause itself does not allow a six-years-backdated claim. If EU residents are entitled to make such a claim, what about non-EU residents? What about companies in the United States that are not resident in the United Kingdom but that trade through a branch or agency in this country? Presumably, such companies will not be entitled to claim the six-years-backdated relief.

I see that the members of the European movement are engaged in a serious confab on the Conservative Benches. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe talks about discrimination, but the discrimination in the case I have described is against the non-EU resident. Let us take our major partner, the United States of America. Does it follow from my analysis—I am sure that the Paymaster General's officials will provide an answer by 9 o'clock tonight—that a United States resident would be denied a six-years-backdated relief, despite the fact that an EU resident would be granted the relief, albeit not under the Bill?

I do not want to prolong the debate but I have to ask, what about the cases that are in the pipeline? There is a case in which a large German multinational company is challenging the entire imputation system of corporation tax. That system has now been abolished, or at least changed to a substantial extent. The imputation system provided different rates of tax relief or tax credit in respect of underlying corporation tax to residents and non-residents: usually, non-residents received half the relief that residents received. That case is now going through the courts, and my reading of the jurisprudence is that the European Court might strike down our imputation system. In fact, it has been struck down already, so that fox has been shot. I do not know why the Chancellor did away with, or at least changed substantially, the old imputation system of corporation tax. I am sure that there were many good reasons. However, I and others cannot help thinking that he had better shoot the fox once and for all, before the European Court does it for him.

Finally, let me deal with the point raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe about different tax rates. I forget the name of the case, but one of the arguments advanced by the taxpayer—I forget whether it is a Belgian, French or German taxpayer—in one of the cases that came before the court was that that taxpayer had been denied the same tax rates in Germany as applied to a resident in Germany because that taxpayer was resident in France. I believe that the taxpayer lived in France and taught in Germany. The challenge was based on the fact that German tax rates differ from French tax rates, which was, in itself, discrimination.

The court was a bit wary of taking that approach and, in the end, it did not do so. The Advocate General, in rabbinical guise, managed to find a way not to challenge the nation state on the issue of tax rates. However, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is a lawyer and he knows how cases are built up; he knows that there will be another case—another challenge to differential tax rates. It may well be that, in a few years' time and in a different climate, and once it has developed its jurisprudence, the court will feel more confident and will decide that the very fact of a French tax rate of 30 per cent. and a German tax rate of 35 per cent. discriminates against the person who has to pay the 35 per cent.

At that point we shall have moved into a harmonised system of direct taxation laid down by the European Court of Justice. The Council of Ministers will not be able to do anything about it. There will be no point in trundling out the veto. The court will have introduced the system of its own accord as it has the power to do. The Council of Ministers will be outflanked, and we may find ourselves with a harmonised system of income tax before we realise it.

6.30 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I think I am not the only Member who is not entirely convinced by the argument advanced by the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies). In the United States, the Supreme Court examines various decisions made by the various states: jurisprudence in the United States has not gone down the route that the right hon. Gentleman suggests. There are various rates and systems of taxation in the different states. I favour the arguments of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) over those of the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Denzil Davies: The hon. Gentleman falls into a fallacy. Residency in one state or another does not make any difference to United States income tax and corporation tax. It is residence in the United States that counts. In Europe, we have residence for tax purposes in different states—that is the difference.

Mr. Davey: The right hon. Gentleman has failed to deal with the point that there is variability of rates between the states of the United States—and that will remain the position within Europe. Again, he fails to make his point.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) for his chairmanship of the Select Committee on the Treasury, on which I have the privilege to serve. He gave the House a fair representation of the Committee's report. However, he failed to mention that it was not unanimous because Conservative Members were split. I regret that as, I know, he does.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about openness and accountability, which we discussed in the sittings of the Select Committee and in producing the report in regard to presentation. Some members of the Committee, including me, felt that the Chancellor could have been far more open in dealing with our questions. On many occasions, he failed to answer direct questions directly. That limited the scope of the Committee's inquiries rather too much.

It is difficult to welcome a Finance Bill of such length and complexity. Rather than prudence with purpose, we have prudence with pages—558 of them. The Chief Secretary, in exchanges with the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), said that there are only 152 clauses. Perhaps there are, but there are 40 schedules. The Bill comes before us in two volumes—and that is before the Government have started amending it in Committee as they undoubtedly will. It is a very long and complex Bill.

Ministers are right to say that the present Government are not the first Government to introduce such Bills. Unfortunately, the Conservative Government, when the Treasury was under the chancellorship of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, introduced very long Finance Bills. Indeed, in 1996 the Finance Act ran to 618 pages—even more pages than that of the Bill that preceded it. That has sadly become a trend, and it is an unwelcome one. In 1955, the Finance Act contained 24 pages; in 1965, it had increased to 270; in 1985, it contained 241 pages; and in 1995 it had reached 511. As I have said, the current Bill has 558 pages. Such growth is unwelcome not only because it increases complexity but because it increases compliance costs for business.

We are having to consider longer and more complex legislation. The proposed capital gains tax legislation is incredibly complex. There are five schedules dealing with CGT changes alone—and that from a Government who introduced CGT changes two years ago which were supposed to be about promoting long-termism.

Two years ago, long-termism meant taper relief of 10 years. In the pre-Budget report in November 1999, the Government proposed taper relief of five years. Moving on from a CGT regime to promote long-termism, they are now saying that there should be taper relief for only four years. As a result of these changes we have inconsistency and complexity. That is bad tax legislation.

The number of tax rates in the personal and corporate tax systems since the Government came to power has ballooned. With more than 50 tax rates, there are now three times the number that applied in 1997. The Bill does nothing to reduce their number. Increased complexity means increased costs on business.

Mr. Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman complains of the complexity of the five capital gains tax schedules, but does he not accept that their effect will be dramatically to reduce the complexity of CGT? As he has said, we are changing from a 10-year taper moving the rate down to 20 per cent, to a four-year taper moving it down to 10 per cent—the lowest ever rate. The move has been widely welcomed throughout the accountancy world and by business.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman would have a point if the Government had not introduced 10-year taper relief in the first place. The change has meant that the accountancy profession and businesses are having to deal with two sets of legislation, the interaction of which is incredibly complicated. We welcome the fact that the Government are at last seeing sense, but if they had done so in the Finance Act 1998, we would not have the present complexity and the time-wasting and expensive procedures for business.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): May I draw to the hon. Gentleman's attention the example of an individual who might have bought some shares in the business for which he worked in 1995, who will now face three different CGT calculations? There will be the earlier one with indexation; followed by one on the 10-year taper; and, following this year's Budget, one for a four-year taper to bring the rate down to 10 per cent. That is a ludicrously complex calculation for someone to face simply for being virtuous enough to have some shares in the company for which they work.

Mr. Davey: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. There are three starting dates for the different CGT regimes. As I have said, the proposal has increased complexity and costs for business. It is a serious matter.

The Government talk about wanting to remove the regulatory burden on business: they cannot try to meet that objective if, within the tax system, a key part of the regulations with which business has to comply is becoming increasingly complex because the Government are increasing the amount of tax legislation. The process diverts resources from the job of business, which should be to promote the prosperity and growth of business. Increased legislation means that there is more work for accountants and more work within business as it focuses on various tax schemes and various possible tax avoidance schemes. That is not good tax legislation.

It is time for reform. We could start by separating the finance legislation that comes before the House. The tax measures that are needed to raise significant sums to keep the Government's finances running could be set out in a short Bill, which could come before the House shortly after the Budget to ensure that the Government had statutory cover for their tax-raising powers.

There could then be a second Bill called, for example, the Tax Technicalities Bill, which would be published in draft form. There would be wide consultation, and an effort would be made to adhere to various codes of simplicity so as to reduce complexity. An effort would also be made to ensure that tax changes were not for ever happening—there could then be continuity within the tax system. With such a Bill, we could begin to change the culture of the Treasury and the way in which successive Chancellors of all persuasions have gone about introducing their tax legislation.

I suggest that Treasury Ministers refer themselves to a very good report produced by the tax faculty of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, entitled "Towards a Better Tax System". It refers to 10 tenets that a Government should adopt to try to ensure that they reduce the regulatory burden of the tax system on business. I commend the report to Ministers and Back-Bench Members alike.

Let me move on to the terms of the fiscal policy that the Bill will put in place for the forthcoming year. There are some real problems.

There are always two questions that one can ask about fiscal policy for the forthcoming year—first, does it leave the Government with enough money to fund their programmes without excessive borrowing, and secondly, does it complement monetary policy by keeping the economy growing in a sustainable way, without having knock-on effects for interest rates and the exchange rate?

On the funding aspect of fiscal policy, there can be no doubt that the Government can fund their programme. They have an incredibly strong fiscal position. Here I part company from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe. I do not believe that the Government are losing control of public spending. Yes, there has been a loosening of fiscal policy, with which I will deal shortly, but to say that they are losing control is an exaggeration.

[Mr. Davey]

The Government have huge fiscal surpluses, continuing into the future. No objective analyst could fail to conclude that it is one of the strongest fiscal positions that any Government have had in living memory. The Liberal Democrats unreservedly welcome that development.

The question is why it has taken the Government so long to realise that. The Liberal Democrats have been speaking about the Chancellor's war chest and the healthy state of the public finances since the start of the Parliament. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe referred to that. It is no surprise that the Government finances are in such a good state. They should have used the healthy public finances early in the Parliament to invest in our public services, to make sure that our schools and hospitals had the money that they so desperately needed.

Those of us who serve on the Select Committee on the Treasury heard City economists telling us that. Geoffrey Dicks said:

> With the benefit of hindsight, I would have spent the money on health and education two years ago.

Those were his words. [HON. MEMBERS: "With the benefit of hindsight."] The Government had the benefit of Liberal Democrat foresight. We gave them that advice, and Ministers failed to take it. That is why there was the crisis in the NHS this winter.

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): Is the hon. Gentleman telling us that his middle name is Mystic Meg?

Mr. Davey: No. One did not have to be Mystic Meg to realise that the public finances were in a good state two years ago. After the 22 tax rises introduced by the Conservatives and the tax rises announced early on in the present Parliament, it was clear that the public finances were in an extremely good state.

The Conservative Opposition may have predicted recession a year or two ago, but the Liberal Democrats did not. We believed that the economy was healthy and that the public finances would remain healthy. We were responsible in arguing for targeted, sensible and early investment in the public services.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way once again. Does he accept that at that stage, the sensible thing to do was to pay off the £28 billion of public sector debt? That means that the revenues into the Exchequer are now that much greater. Does he also accept that at every stage, what he was calling for in public sector expenditure has been trumped by a multiple of approximately six in the steps that the Government have taken?

Mr. Davey: I do not accept that. No one is suggesting that in the early years of this Parliament, the Liberal Democrats were arguing for £28 billion in public expenditure. Of course some of that surplus should have been used to pay back the debt, but other moneys were available to the Government early in the Parliament, which they should have invested. Because they failed to do so, people died as a result of lack of treatment by the NHS. People did not get the service that they needed. It was open to the Government to make those decisions and they failed.

The political problem facing the Government is evident to everyone. We saw this Christmas a huge crisis in the national health service. The Government had to react. That is why, at long last, they went against what they had set out in the comprehensive spending review and put extra money into the NHS for the forthcoming year. We unreservedly welcome that. It should have come earlier.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: No. I want to explain to the House what is happening at the coal face. Last Friday, I visited my local hospital, Kingston Hospital NHS Trust, and spoke to the chief executive about the extra money that was found for the coming financial year. He welcomed it, as we have, but he said that because of the underfunding in the previous years of this Parliament, it will go to pay for the deficits. It will not pay for expansion of services; it will pay for the deficits. That was not needed. The Government could have chosen a different path, and I regret that they failed to do so.

There is a profound issue relating to the fiscal surpluses that have built up and how that changes the nature of economic and policy debate in this country. I hope the Chancellor will take this on board as he approaches the comprehensive spending review.

We have left behind the years of high unemployment under the Tories. With high employment and a growing economy, the public finances are in a much better state than they have been for decades. We are back to the era of the 1950s and 1960s, when the problem for a Chancellor is how he spends the money, rather than how he affords the programmes. That is a welcome development. It is time that we started focusing on that argument.

As other hon. Members have said, the Budget must be judged by whether the way in which the money is to be spent is affordable for the macro-economy, or whether it has the potential to destabilise the macro-economy. The Select Committee was clear that if the fiscal stance is judged in absolute terms, the Chancellor has undoubtedly loosened fiscal policy.

In our alternative Budget, the Liberal Democrats clearly and openly advocated extra spending, but we covered much of that by extra taxation, believing that this was not an appropriate time to loosen fiscal policy because of the high level of real interest rates and the high level of the pound. That is where we believe the Government are going seriously wrong in their management of the macro-economy. They have loosened fiscal policy for 2000–01, but they are not getting the balance right. That is a shame.

The International Monetary Fund was right to criticise the Government. It stated:

> In this regard—

that is, in respect of fiscal policy—

> the recently announced budget for 2000/2001 appears to be regrettably pro-cyclical.

That means, in short, that there will be higher interest rates as a result.

It was interesting that in the Red Book, the Chancellor tried to hide his largesse, but we uncovered it in the Treasury Committee. On Budget day, the Chancellor announced £3.1 billion for 2001–02 for the NHS, but he failed to tell the House that there is another £5.9 billion in the Red Book to be allocated to other public services. He did not announce that because he is worried about scaring the markets. He knew that he had loosened fiscal policy; he just did not want to admit it.

Mr. Radice: I remind the hon. Gentleman, who has been fair in his description of what the Treasury Committee said, that we also said that Monetary Policy Committee had met twice and had not put up rates. We could have added—it has just happened—that the deputy Governor said that the impact of the Budget on monetary policy was slight. In fairness, the hon. Gentleman should say that as well.

Mr. Davey: What the right hon. Gentleman says is true. The impact may be slight, but it is certainly positive. That means that interest rates are likely to be higher than they would otherwise have been. For a struggling exporter or farmer, that slight change and the fact that the exchange rate and interest rates will be higher, are significant. It is no use Ministers wringing their hands when manufacturers and farmers come to them. The Government failed to make the right decisions in the Budget.

Liz Blackman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: No. I need to make progress.

The problem is that fiscal policy has been loosened not just in 2000-01. It will be loosened significantly up to 2004. The Treasury official, Mr. Gus O'Donnell, gave that away when he gave evidence to the Treasury Committee. He said that we need to get back to current balance as the golden rule dictates, but that the Treasury had decided to go back slightly more slowly than the rule would suggest. He admitted that there was significant loosening in prospect.

Although we welcome the extra public spending, we must not take risks with the stability of the macro-economy. If that means funding extra public spending through taxation, the Government should not shy away from that. They must be prepared to make tough decisions to ensure that we do not return to boom and bust.

When deciding priorities for public spending in the next few years, Ministers should consider pensioners. The national insurance fund has a huge surplus of billions of pounds, yet some pensioners are in serious need. Yesterday's *Sunday Times* reported that Ministers now admit that they made a mistake. A senior Minister was quoted as saying that it was a mistake to grant an increase in the state pension of a mere 75p this year and that the Government would suffer a backlash. That is deserved, especially when they send hon. Members glossy, laminated propaganda about their achievements for older people. They should acknowledge that 75p is an insult, apologise to the House and pensioners throughout the country and start to put matters right.

Mr. Rammell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davey: No, I will not.

I want to examine one or two provisions. First, let us consider the climate change levy, which is a new tax. Many people have pointed out that the tax will not achieve its objective. It taxes energy, not carbon. We are faced with a global environmental catastrophe because of greenhouse gases and global warming, and should not try to suggest that the new tax will help tackle that problem. We need a proper phased carbon tax, which ensures that industry adjusts and makes the changes necessary to reduce greenhouse gases. The climate change levy will not achieve that.

Many details in the climate change levy are wrong. For example, combined heat and power schemes have only a partial exemption. Some good CHP schemes will not go ahead because of the way in which the climate change levy is designed. Earlier today, I spoke to representatives of a large United Kingdom public limited company, which had planned to introduce a CHP scheme, but will not do that because of the description of the climate change levy in the Bill.

The Bill is a missed opportunity for the environment; it fails to develop the green tax agenda. Chart 6.2 in the Red Book shows the effect of that failure. Greenhouse gas emissions will increase in the next few years. The Government have reneged on their pre-election target of a 20 per cent. cut in greenhouse gas emissions. If chart 6.2 provides a true picture, they may miss even the Kyoto target. That would be a disgrace.

There is great anger in the information technology, engineering and offshore oil industries about the way in which IR35 will hit many people, especially single-person contractors. The Government may be right to tackle avoidance, but they are using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. We will argue that vigorously in Committee because we believe that the Government should withdraw the provisions on IR35 and consult widely again to get it right.

Dawn Primarolo: Why do the Liberal Democrats advocate an increase of 1p in everyone's taxation rate while defending a position whereby some people avoid paying the proper rate of tax or national insurance?

Mr. Davey: The Paymaster General could not have been listening. I argued against tax avoidance. The hon. Lady should consult officials and the industry and try to devise more targeted provisions which tackle the avoidance problem but do not create genuine difficulties for important sectors of British industry. When we debate the matter fully in Committee, I shall ask the Paymaster General how she will monitor the impact of IR35 to ensure that key people do not leave these shores and work elsewhere.

I shall also ask the Paymaster General to ensure that the IR35 provisions are implemented flexibly, especially in the early years, to ensure that tax officials give the benefit of the doubt to businesses that make legitimate mistakes in interpreting unclear provisions, and help them to comply. We shall argue that if Ministers stick to the IR35 provisions, the Government should provide for more generous allowances, especially for administration and training.

Liberal Democrats cannot support the Conservative amendment because it is irresponsible. It proposes reducing taxes when the economy is growing fairly fast

[Mr. Davey]

and when, to quote the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, a loosening of fiscal policy is planned. It would therefore be irresponsible to agree to the Conservative suggestion of reducing taxes all round. That would lead to higher inflation, a higher exchange rate, higher interest rates and a catastrophe for the United Kingdom economy. Indeed, it would mean a return to boom and bust. We shall therefore not support the Conservative party in the Lobby tonight.

We shall oppose the Bill because it is too long, creates too many complexities, provides for a fiscal policy that is too loose and is far too niggardly to pensioners, the health service and schools.

6.56 pm

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): I am pleased to speak in support of the Finance Bill and against the amendments tabled by the Liberal Democrats and by the Conservative party.

The Bill builds on the work of previous Budgets. It establishes a new and stronger framework, which will safeguard the future prospects of the British economy. It builds further a platform of stability, locks it in place, extends employment opportunities for all and lifts millions of hard-working families out of poverty. The Bill sets out strong but realisable ambitions for the British economy; we should accept nothing less. However, they were unthinkable under the boom-and-bust policies of the Tory Governments of the past.

Step by step, the Government are constructing a platform of economic stability. The platform is an effective metaphor: it has sound and solid foundations, which are based on the independence of the Bank of England and the new fiscal rules. The Bill will rightly lock the new stability into place. We reject the boom-and-bust economics of the past for the simple reason that Britain cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the previous Tory Government. Reckless borrowing led to swingeing cuts in public services; scarce resources had to be siphoned off to pay the interest burden on the public debt.

It would not be right to accept the Liberal Democrats' suggestion and abandon prudent management of the economy for the sake of short-term gain. That would also take us back to the boom-and-bust economics of the past that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and his party rightly reject.

Boom-and-bust economics took Britain through two of the most damaging recessions of the post-war era; it led to millions of men and women losing their jobs and their livelihoods; it destroyed hundreds of thousands of businesses and broke the dreams and aspirations of a generation.

It is right to remind the House of the economic legacy of the recent past, not least because the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said that specific groups of people in Britain would be under attack because of the Budget. What about the damage that the Tory years of boom and bust did to Britain? We can celebrate only one victim of boom and bust: the Tory party's reputation for economic credibility and competence.

Is it a surprise that the man who argued in the House for the privatisation of the health service one week was appointed shadow Chancellor the next? Is it a surprise that we heard soon after of reckless proposed tax cuts for the privileged few, packaged as a tax guarantee? Those are reckless promises because the country will remember broken Tory tax promises and 22 Tory tax rises in the previous Parliament alone. That appointment is no surprise because the Tories are still in the business of making rash policy gestures based on a horizon that stretches no further than the next general election. Apart from its record in government and the posturing that has gone on since, the Conservative party should examine the economic figures that it suggests, which simply do not add up.

I welcome the fiscal tightening represented by the Budget. Putting to one side the debate about whether there is tightening or loosening, tax revenues are increasing because of the Government's policy, opposed by the Conservative party, of increasing employment and participation in the labour market. That is boosting tax revenues. As a result, we are able to spend more on much needed public services such as education and health. Contrast that with the previous Government's record: the generation of mass unemployment, the huge social costs of carrying it and public services starved of the resources that they needed.

The Budget locks in place the platform of stability that we need to build a new economic framework to safeguard Britain's future. On that platform the Government seek to build three lasting and interrelated elements of the new economy.

Mr. Geraint Davies: On stability, does my hon. Friend agree that the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) were ridiculous? He said that there would be no independence for the Bank of England, interest rates would be lowered unilaterally and inflation would rip. Perhaps he should be known as the Chancellor ripper. Does my hon. Friend agree that stability has been the key to our success—800,000 jobs—and that the Opposition would jeopardise that?

Mr. Casale: I have some respect for the right hon. and learned Gentleman and for his views on Europe in particular, which are out of kilter with those of his party. However, in 1996 he had to strip hundreds of thousands of pounds of much-needed investment due for London Underground out of the last Tory Budget—with deepest regret, I am sure—and public services in my constituency, especially the Northern line, have been run down ever since. As a result, South Wimbledon station's refurbishment, which was due in 1997, has been carried out only this year. He is as much to blame as the others, but whether he wants to learn from those mistakes is an open question. The Conservative Front-Bench team seem to want nothing more than the opportunity to repeat them.

The first and foremost of the three elements is modernisation of the public services. We rightly want to provide a massive injection of new funds, especially into the health service, and to achieve far-reaching reforms to deliver best value and raise productivity. We want extra money for schools and for other public services such as transport and the fight against crime. However, we can contemplate such reforms only against the backdrop of economic stability.

The second element is welfare reforms that focus on reconnecting the lives of many people who have become completely disengaged from the labour market. However,

the reforms will also provide security and dignity for all those for whom that is not an option and encourage people to save and to make more provision for retirement.

The third related element is labour market reform based on putting a floor under wages through the national minimum wage and making resources available for training and for lifelong learning. That will not only enable us to bring people back into the labour market, but allow them to contribute more productively once they are back in. Their work will be of greater value and they will be able to move up the labour market value chain and raise productivity for the whole country.

These reforms are closely interrelated; we cannot reform welfare without reforming the labour market to make it more flexible. If we can get people off welfare and into work, there will be greater resources for the public services. They could be invested in education, which would increase skills. That would raise productivity, which would help people to become more productive in the labour market later on.

In contrast to the vicious Tory cycle of boom and bust and neglect and decline, and built on that platform of economic stability, we are starting to see a virtuous circle of increased productivity and increased long-term productive capacity in the British economy.

In office, the Tories made the mistake of believing that the economy could grow and Britain could succeed while millions were left out and forgotten. Their Government thought that it did not matter in economic terms if thousands of young people left school without a job and no immediate prospect of getting one and were given no chance in life. Promoting fairness and bringing individuals back into the labour market is precisely how we build the foundations for long-term prosperity, which is why the steps in the Budget aimed at creating a fairer Britain are also part and parcel of building a stronger economy.

The Budget is lifting children out of poverty—it aims to halve child poverty in 10 years and eliminate it in 20—and delivers extra support for pensioners. More than 15,000 in my constituency of Wimbledon will benefit from the increase in the winter fuel allowance. It also rewards working families through the tax system with the working families tax credit. Step by step, a broader vision of how Britain could be in future is emerging. Contrast that with the narrow attack on individual Budget measures or the Liberal Democrat position that this visionary Budget is simply too long.

In that vision, Britain's long-term economic prospects are more secure. All who want to work are able to, which is perhaps a modern definition of full employment. In that Britain, child poverty will be halved, hard-working families will be lifted out of poverty and public services will be modernised, reinvigorated and working for the good of all rather than a rump serving those who cannot afford private provision.

Contrast the Bill's strength and vision with the pathetic spectre of a Tory party that has lost its reputation for economic competence and hides behind criticising the proposals as too complicated—the Tories' proposed simplicity would result from privatising public services, borrowing against future revenues and reckless tax cuts—and a Liberal party that has again become entangled in the complexities of its own contradictions. Once again, the Liberals have failed to see the wood for the trees.

The Bill is substantial. Taken together, its measures represent an important new step in the creation of a framework for a fairer and more prosperous Britain. I commend it to the House.

7.9 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I have listened carefully to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) and hope that he will volunteer to serve on the Finance Bill Committee. Once he has had the opportunity to wade through 588 pages and examine some of the more Byzantine and complex ways in which the Chancellor seeks to translate his proposals into law, he will be less enthusiastic about condemning simplicity and more on the side of Conservative Members, who speak with the voice of experience and reality.

I strongly support the Conservative amendment, which asks the House to decline to give the Bill a Second Reading, because of its 558 pages and its content—the extra taxes that it imposes on the citizens of Wimbledon and the rest of the United Kingdom, on the businesses of Wimbledon and the rest of the United Kingdom, and, importantly, on home owners in Wimbledon. I intend to say something about business taxation later. I remind the House that I have properly declared my declarable interests—principally, my interest as a non-executive director of a quoted public company.

Before we talk about the size of the Bill, we must reflect on how a Finance Bill is put together. It is always interesting to observe the creative tension, and the battle that takes place between Inland Revenue officials, Treasury officials and Ministers as they decide just how big a Bill they think they can cope with—and, more importantly, what measures need to go into it. I think that this Bill is so long—its length has already been mentioned—and so complex for two reasons.

This is likely to be the last full-length Finance Bill before the next general election. All the evidence suggests that certain people are sweeping every possible bit of legislation into a large pile, on the basis that next year they will not be so lucky. As for the Bill's complexity, I think it reflects the fact that this Chancellor likes to fiddle with the tax system. The Red Book contains a series of measures—small measures—dealing with small and medium-sized enterprises. It continues a trend that the Chancellor has followed ever since taking office: the introduction of a series of small measures that are not terribly well thought out, and are certainly not crafted with care in the sense of evaluating the real effect on the economy—measures whose whole purpose is to give the impression of an active Chancellor who is doing all kinds of things, probably to very little effect. That is the sort of trend that leads to a long Finance Bill.

Another reason for the fact that our Finance Bills have become longer is that the financial community has become more adept at finding ways around the drafting of legislation. I warmed to the theme of the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), the Liberal spokesman, who spoke of the need to separate the parts of the Bill that deal with the Taxes Management Act 1970 and the parts that deal with the more contentious elements of the Budget. I made that point last year, and I make it again this year. If we are to have any meaningful reform of our tax laws, it is important to make that separation in the legislation and the concurrent consultation.

[Mr. Michael Jack]

If I am selected as a member of the Standing Committee, I hope to table an amendment asking the Treasury to go one step further than the tax law rewrite exercise. I have been on the steering committee dealing with that exercise. It is interesting not only to observe the results of the rewrite of our tax law in plain English, but to note the frustration of those who have been involved. They are frustrated by the dearth of resources to support the exercise; but more interestingly, they are frustrated by the fact that, although measures to smooth the operation of our existing law are already emerging, they cannot be enacted because of the inevitable strictures of the rewrite exercise. I do not apologise for that, because I was partly responsible, but I think it fair to say that the exercise is doing a good job in showing better ways in which the existing tax law could be developed.

If we are talking about reform, we must be certain about whether we want better, clearer legislation of the current type, or less tax legislation in total. If we want to reform the tax system fundamentally, how would we do that? I do not think that question has been properly answered, but practitioners cry out for an answer. I hope that the Treasury will look kindly on the idea of a report showing how the tax law rewrite could be taken into territory allowing a real reform of the system. That might take a decade, but we need to think about it. We should ensure that size does not necessarily determine whether a Finance Bill is good or bad, and that quality and clarity become the benchmarks.

Some of the proposals feature niggling complexities. We have already heard today about changes in the Government's energy policy. I was interested to note that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry chose today to announce some easing of the moratorium on gas-fired power stations. Having tabled parliamentary questions, I learned from the Government that there was no need for the climate change levy as currently proposed. While I entirely support the idea of saving 2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide as a contribution to our Kyoto target and to a reduction in global warming, the proposed method is unnecessarily complex.

Horticulture, in which I earned my living before coming to the House, has survived because it has saved energy over the years, but the best that that industry—which has a superb record on energy saving, and which is carbon-neutral in terms of the job that it performs—can get out of the Government is a 50 per cent. rebate. If the Paymaster General considers the implications of an end to the moratorium on gas-fired power stations, and also reads the parliamentary answers that I have secured from my colleagues so far, she will find that a 13 per cent. reduction in coal-fired electricity generation, coupled with a 14 per cent. increase in generation from gas, will save 2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. The climate change levy, as such, is thus not needed.

If the hon. Lady would like an even more environmentally friendly example, I can refer her to a letter placed in the Library by the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In the England rural development plan, the Ministry was able to point out the benefits of carbon absorption by the planting of miscanthus grass or short rotational coppice—energy crops. I asked the Ministry what would happen if the horticulture industry increased its plantings: could it absorb its own carbon dioxide output? I was told that if 41,000 hectares were planted, that could be done; but much more tellingly, that the planting in the United Kingdom of 108,000 hectares of short rotational coppice would take away all the 2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. That complies with Government policy.

I estimate that the cost would be £150 million. If burning that short rotational coppice required, as it would, the construction of more appropriate power stations, the cost could be recovered through the cost of the energy itself. If necessary, the Government could recoup any upfront moneys that they had to invest to encourage that form of activity.

We have 18.6 million hectares under cultivation; the 108,000 hectares that I mentioned represent about 0.5 per cent. of our cultivatable land area. In a simple, straightforward, environmentally friendly, job-creating way, we could do away with the levy, and provide a solution to the complexities in the Bill. It is time that the Government looked for some energy-saving carrots, instead of always looking for sticks with which to beat people, and imposing additional costs on UK industry that will not be imposed on our continental and world-based competitors.

Just as the Government refuse to consider such simple ways of dealing with climate change, they reveal themselves as the authors of complexity on page 147 of Red Book, in the Financial Statement and Budget Report, which deals with the parts of the Bill that introduce variable rates of vehicle excise duty on new cars. There is nothing in the Bill or the Budget praising motor manufacturers for their technical ingenuity in reducing noxious emissions, nor anything that recognises the fact that Europe's car makers have already voluntarily agreed to exceed Government emission standards by means of their own technology and agreements throughout Europe.

I do not know what the table in page 147 is supposed to say about future emissions because there has been no environmental impact study. There are four VED bands and three levels of taxation: for cars using cleaner fuels, for petrol cars and for diesel cars. We are supposed to find that all sorts of magic things will occur because of a spread in VED—it will be between £90 and £160. In terms of influencing people's car purchase, it is for the birds. To be introduced, such a system requires complex legislation, but it is against a background of no measurable environmental benefit because no study has been done. It is about time the Government looked more carefully at the way they introduce legislation, because it is complex indeed.

In the Budget, attempts are made to bring the same environmental schemes to the field of company car taxation. The Government have seen fit to amend the previous arrangement, which may have induced people to drive unnecessarily long distances to try to get over the 18,000-mile barrier to pay a discounted rate of company car tax, rather than the full rate. However, the Government seem to have introduced a full, head-on charge for the man who takes home the company van, the genuine company car user, the person for whom the company car is a proper tool of the trade.

That person has in no way been assisted by the proposal. Again, there is no effort to try to work out whether company car purchase schemes will be influenced by that mechanism, yet in its own way, it adds complexity to the Bill.

One thing confuses me above all else. If, through those two measures on motor vehicles, the Government are trying to encourage a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, why are they penalising the most carbon dioxide-efficient type of engine: the diesel? They seem to have imposed a penalty on such cars. They say that they will consult and do something about it later, but why wait until later? Why not do something about it now and back companies such as BP Amoco, which are introducing their own very clean fuels? One of the benefits of the fuel will be to take away sulphur dioxide emissions. It will be burned by the most energy-efficient engine.

I do not see the logic in what the Government are doing, introducing unnecessary complexity in that whole area. There is very little to encourage the take-up of liquified petroleum gas, which in terms of non-carbon dioxide emissions is one of the cleanest fuels in the country. The Government's policies in that area are confused.

I comment next on the Government's arrangements for non-controlled foreign companies, so-called, company mixer schemes, and the tax arrangements for companies trading abroad. I well understand why companies have become concerned about that form of taxation. It is true that there was consultation with business on double taxation over the two years before the Budget, but nowhere in that consultation exercise was there any indication of the proposal to change the nature of those companies and their tax position—that was not part of the consultation exercise. All of a sudden, the competitive position of United Kingdom companies trading on a world basis has been put at risk by the proposal.

I held a conversation with one such company last Thursday to establish beyond peradventure whether it would be trading at a disadvantage. The answer is very clearly that it would. In a tax sense, it will be treated worse, for example, than its German counterparts.

The company has a subsidiary. The mixing of revenues under different tax regimes takes place in Luxembourg. It can maintain its competitive position, for example, compared with German companies, by mixing streams of incomes, which have borne a different rate of taxation. As a result, it can maintain a competitive tax regime compared with its continental counterparts and sustain a regular flow of investment to new enterprise in Europe.

Dawn Primarolo: Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why he believes that multinationals should be able to use offshore structures to mix foreign tax and thus deny the Exchequer the right level of tax in the UK?

Mr. Jack: Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to explain what she means exactly by "the right level of tax." If UK companies are using legitimate methods of safeguarding their tax position, whatever income is eventually remitted to the UK can be taxed appropriately. That seems the right way in which to tax.

Dawn Primarolo: Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that that is precisely the point? Some multinationals are bringing their profits back to the UK to be taxed at the tax rate in the UK and others are using offshore arrangements not to do that and to mix. Does he think that fair to the multinationals that are bringing back their profits to be taxed here at our rate?

Mr. Jack: If we talk to companies that are active in business, they will point out that, sometimes, because of their investment strategy abroad, they need to maintain investment income on a world basis to carry on investing, particularly if that investment was originally funded by seedcorn capital from the UK. Once that capital starts to generate interest and dividends, which can then be returned to the UK, there is a stream of income which could be taxable. Every other major G7 member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has the ability to mix tax. What the hon. Lady has put forward clearly leaves UK companies at a competitive disadvantage compared with their G7 counterparts.

Dawn Primarolo: I am looking forward to discussing the matter in Committee with the right hon. Gentleman; I hope that he gets on to the Committee. Does he accept that, when we compare how we tax our multinationals and, in particular, the use of our controlled foreign company legislation, with the practice of our European partners, we find that the Government's proposals are to bring us into line with the competitive practice of other countries, not the reverse?

Mr. Jack: I find that very difficult to accept, particularly in the light of the letter that was sent to the Chancellor by Dame Sheila Master. Perhaps the hon. Lady will, in her winding-up speech, comment on Dame Sheila's points, some of which I have drawn on. It is always a mark of the sensitivity that those on the Treasury Bench feel about remarks by Conservative Members when the Paymaster General chooses to intervene on the remarks of a humble Back Bencher on three separate occasions. I can only assume that my comments are hitting home.

The Government's proposals will effectively change the regime on the qualifying arrangements for non-controlled foreign companies, which currently enable them to take advantage of the different taxation regimes throughout the world in mixing their incomes. The proposals will make it more difficult for them to remain competitive. The hon. Lady should concentrate on addressing business's concerns about international competitiveness, rather than take swipes at me because I choose to raise what business experts are saying.

Mr. Gardiner: May a humble Back Bencher intervene on a humble ex-Minister? The right hon. Gentleman talked of companies that were taking the opportunity to safeguard their tax position. Can he clarify precisely what he meant by the word "safeguard"? Does that simply mean, in common parlance, paying minimal taxes in this country?

Mr. Jack: No, that is not what the type of company to which I am referring is about. The company to which I have referred is in direct competition with European rivals in a retail business. In order to maintain its competitiveness, it must use the same mechanisms as are available to its European competitors. I am referring to its safeguarding its relative competitive position. It is a pity that the Paymaster General did not offer the possibility of onshore tax mixing in order that she might have more direct jurisdiction over such flows of income, and at the same time, maintain British companies' ability to take advantage of differing rates of taxation that are levied on their earnings in different parts of the world. It is clear that companies feel an injustice, a subject to which I hope we shall return.

[Mr. Jack]

I should like briefly to raise two other points before I conclude. The question of IR35 has been raised. People from all over the country who are affected by IR35 came to a meeting in my constituency. Subsequently, I have contacted some companies that provide the Government with information technology practitioners. They confirm that, because of IR35, they envisage problems retaining staff and staff going abroad to practise their skills; and that, in spite of changes to the employment test that the Paymaster General and the Inland Revenue have introduced, the provision bears unfairly on such workers.

Kali Mountford: The right hon. Gentleman says that there is a risk of people going abroad to avoid tax. He is talking about tax avoidance. Will he name countries to which he thinks people are likely to go, because he will find that most countries levy such tax?

Mr. Jack: I did not use the words "tax avoidance". The Treasury and the Inland Revenue became twitchy on the matter because the Government created a tax regime in which small-scale companies could legitimately take advantage of UK laws. People are so concerned about IR35 because as a group of, effectively, self-employed practitioners, they are unfairly penalised compared with other enterprises.

A corner shopkeeper may pay himself in dividends and take advantage of the Government's changes to corporation tax law, but an individual who supplies services in IT or other industries will not receive the same tax treatment. We are talking not about avoiding tax but about people who want to pay tax. We are talking about the self-employed person who takes risks—the very entrepreneurs whom I thought the hon. Lady's party was supposed to support. With respect, her question shows her ignorance of the matters.

I thank the Chief Secretary for his kindness in agreeing to consider the effects of the working families tax credit on lone parents who work unsocial hours in, for example, the health service and social care and find it difficult to secure appropriate registered child care to enable them to work. That is a small failing in legislation. I hope that Treasury Ministers will make representations to the Department for Education and Employment and perhaps table an amendment to ensure that parents who want to work 24 hours around the clock and are in need of child care may benefit from the working families tax credit.

7.33 pm

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): I will not detain the House long; I seek only to make a few comments on issues that affect my constituency and constituents. I declare at the outset that I am a paid adviser to the Caravan Club. I make that declaration because one of my comments will relate to motor car taxation, which has many affects on caravaners.

I welcome the Budget and the Finance Bill, especially measures on relieving child poverty. I welcome the working families tax credit and the extra money that has been allocated to the national health service. Like other hon. Members, I cannot understand the Opposition's amendment, which simply complains about the Bill's length and complexity.

The first area that I will raise briefly relates to our treatment of pensioners. As hon. Members, we have all been lobbied by pensioners who are somewhat unhappy with the increase in their retirement pension. I am aware of the Government's letter, which has been circulated in the past few days, setting out the help that the Government have given pensioners. I very much welcome the minimum income guarantee and relaxation of the limits on savings, from which more people will benefit.

I also welcome the £150 winter fuel payment—but, so far, that has not been paid. I receive many complaints from pensioners who want to know, bearing in mind the small increase in their retirement pension, when that money will be made available. As they constantly point out, their council tax, council house rents and various other household costs have risen, but benefits have not increased to meet that.

Another example, to which I have referred before, relates to the provision of free television licences for all those over the age of 75. Quite a lot of housing association tenants will not qualify because their television licences are included in their rent. I have seen nothing yet from any housing association suggesting that they will pay pensioners the equivalent of the licence fee. Therefore, the Government could have done a little more with the money available to them to provide for the welfare of pensioners.

I also want to make a point about tax allowances. I fully appreciate the reasons behind the Chancellor's moves to cut the married couples allowance and to introduce a children's allowance in order to target the cost of bringing up a family. I have been heavily lobbied by my constituents on tax allowances, especially by one person who, two years ago, suffered an accident which left him paralysed. He is wheelchair-bound, living on the occupational pension from his previous employment—he was a qualified engineer on a considerable salary—and incapacity benefit. Over the past week, his tax bill has increased by about £11 a week. I find it strange that we are targeting tax increases on people who live in such unfortunate circumstances.

I turn to one of my old favourites: tobacco taxation and smuggling. I have raised this issue on a number of occasions and my hon. Friend the Paymaster General knows my views. She is aware that my area has suffered greatly from smugglers—people who operate on an organised basis, bringing contraband tobacco, alcohol or whatever into the country on a huge scale.

I fully support increases in tobacco tax to discourage smoking, which results in a huge cost to the NHS and society. We should do as much as we can to decrease smoking, which, as has been pointed out, is sadly on the increase, especially among young women. I agree that we must take measures to combat smoking, but my worry is that such measures are defeated by smuggling.

In my constituency, it is very easy to buy cheap cigarettes; they are on sale all over the area. I have been lobbied constantly by tobacconists and newsagents, who inform me that it is not worth their while even trying to sell tobacco products because they cannot compete with smugglers. When I talk of smuggling, I mean the arrival of contraband goods in articulated lorries so many times a week. A smuggler will sell to his runners at a £1 profit cartons of cigarettes that he has bought for £12 or £13. They, in turn, will sell them at £1 profit, and that is how the stuff is distributed throughout the constituency.

The issue is whether we continue to increase tax on tobacco products without addressing smuggling. Regardless of the difference in taxation rates, whenever there is a financial incentive for people to smuggle tobacco into the United Kingdom, they will do so. We have to determine how to deal with smuggling. I welcome the action that the Government have already taken and the extra money that they have provided to prevent smuggling, but it seems that that action is not yet working and that we shall have to re-double our efforts. The same arguments apply to alcohol. However, although the dangers of alcohol are real, they are not as bad as those of tobacco.

I am a member of the Caravan Club and, as I said, represent it in the House. Increased motoring costs are a major concern for the club's 300,000 members, who usually have to use a larger car, with a larger engine, to tow their caravan. In a recent survey, the Caravan Club established that 11 per cent. of its members had a company car. Club members are therefore being targeted by the Budget and Finance Bill's measures to increase company car taxation. That increase is having an affect on the leisure industry, as people are having to decide whether they should continue with that leisure pursuit.

Increased taxes on diesel fuel also are affecting caravaners, who often choose to use diesel cars because of their better fuel consumption and performance. Caravaners, the Caravan Club and the tourism and leisure industry feel that they are being unfairly discriminated against by increased diesel fuel duty.

I have often raised the issue of the climate change levy with Ministers, both in private meetings and in the House. I feel that the levy is not the correct way of meeting our Kyoto emissions targets. I accept that we have to deal with CO_2 emissions. I was also a member of the Select Committee on Energy that, in 1990, produced a report on greenhouse gases. As I have often said in the House, that report is still on the shelf, and its recommendations on greenhouse gases and emissions have been ignored.

The climate change levy will be a tax on high-energy users. Consequently, it will be a tax on manufacturing. It will also be a tax on jobs in my constituency, particularly in the glass industry and in another industry that I shall deal with later. The glass industry uses a great deal of energy. As my constituency has one of western Europe's largest glass bottle producers, the industry is a major employer in my constituency.

Luckily, the glass industry can take advantage of the agreements made by energy users under the integrated pollution prevention and control regulations, and will therefore qualify for the discounts available to industries entering energy saving agreements. However, some industries and companies—particularly the British Oxygen Company, which has a distribution centre in my constituency—will not qualify for the discounts.

In his statement today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry promised about £100 million in the next four years for the coal industry, and said that he will lift the stricter gas consents policy. The decision to end the current consents policy will result in the removal of our coal industry from Britain in the next two years. Because of the gas consents that have already been approved, and those that will be allowed in October 2000, there is no way that our industry will be able to compete with gas. Our coal industry will be eclipsed, and we will have ever more gas-fired power stations.

Consequently, even without a climate change levy, we will be able easily to meet the Kyoto targets. I agree with the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) that we really do not need the climate change levy, which will be a tax on jobs in my area. If it is imposed, money will go out of my constituency and jobs will be cut. National insurance rebates will not compensate for those losses.

Recently, the BOC Group—which, as I said, has a distribution centre in my constituency—wrote to me, as I presume it did to many other hon. Members, on the climate change levy. Each year, BOC spends £60 million—which is 78 per cent. of its production costs—on electricity at its largest sites. Although it cannot qualify for any of the exemptions from the climate change levy, it uses more electricity than do some of the industries that can qualify.

BOC is involved in the process of air separation, but that process is not covered by the integrated pollution prevention and control regulations. BOC therefore cannot qualify for the 80 per cent. rebates provided to the glass industry, for example. Similarly, processes that do not melt, but bend glass—such as those used by Pilkingtons in the manufacture of car windscreens—do not qualify for the 80 per cent rebate. The regulations therefore have different effects in different sectors of the glass industry. Although some are able to qualify for the rebates, some cannot. As the automobile components market is very competitive, Pilkingtons vehicle windscreen division will suffer greatly from uneven application of the regulations.

In most of the letters that I have received on the climate change levy, companies make the point that, as they are burning so much energy and their energy costs are so high, they pay very close attention to energy consumption, which they try to reduce by installing the most energy-efficient plant that they can afford.

The aggregates tax is another environmental tax. Although it is not dealt with in the Finance Bill, it has already been mentioned in the debate.

Mr. Jack: Before the hon. Gentleman moves on to the aggregates tax, could he summarise his precise personal position on the climate change levy? Does he think that, as currently formulated, it should be dropped?

Mr. Illsley: Yes, I do. As I said after today's announcement on the British coal industry, there is no need for the climate change levy. It now takes about two years to build a gas-fired power station. We are providing assistance to the coal industry to compete with gas-fired power stations. However, since 1912, gas production has been increasing and coal production has been decreasing. The time has just about come when the gas industry will simply do away with coal. Removal of the stricter consents policy will achieve whatever emissions level we need. I am sad to say that, as my area's industry will be hit, first, by the climate change levy and, secondly, by the loss of our coal industry.

Sand, silicates and other aggregates are used in the glass industry, much of which is located in my constituency. My glass producers will be hit both by the climate change levy and by the aggregates tax. Their raw materials costs will increase.

[Mr. Illsley]

Recently, the Quarry Products Association wrote to me, and presumably to other hon. Members, to point out that it was dismayed that its request for a voluntary agreement to deal with the Government's environmental concerns was rejected in favour of the tax.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is dealing with the aggregates tax. Does he agree that the tax, because of its bad design, will not promote recycling materials rather than using virgin stone, and that it will attack the very companies that are installing the infrastructure necessary to improve the environment? Will they not be worse off for taking that action?

Mr. Illsley: The hon. Gentleman anticipates my point. The tax will not promote good practice in the aggregates industry. The good operator and the bad operator will be equally affected.

Although the glass industry can recycle waste glass, it cannot use recycled quarry materials, as the Government would like it to do. I fully support the protection of national parks and the sites of quarries and minimising the use of raw materials through voluntary agreements, but the proposals will be a tax on jobs in my constituency. We talk a lot about the north-south divide. Here are two examples of a northern heavy industry manufacturing constituency being affected by Government policy.

I welcome the thrust of the Bill and the Budget. I very much welcome the extra money for the national health service and other services and the fact that our economy is strong and our public finances are in good shape. I just wish that the Government would look again at the climate change levy; the aggregates tax; what we are doing for our pensioners; and smuggling.

7.51 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley). I should like to say across the party divide how much I agreed with his comments on bootlegging, the climate change levy and the aggregates tax. I have the same experiences in my constituency.

The Government speak of working for a stronger and fairer Britain. That is an admirable aspiration, but after that I part company with them. I imagine that many Conservative Members agree that a stronger economy cannot be built through the imposition of additional taxes on the wealth-creating sector. We have listened to Government rhetoric. Ministers have said that businesses and jobs will benefit from the Budget. A reasonable test of the Bill is to examine how it will impact on businesses in my constituency, just as the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central assessed its effects on his constituency.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the aggregates tax will be a tax on jobs. There are many jobs in quarries in my constituency, including those operated by Aggregate Industries at Much Wenlock, the Bromfield sand and gravel company at Ludlow, Hanson at Clee hill and Lafarge Redland at Bridgnorth. The Quarry Products Association is not best pleased that, having spent the best part of 18 months working up a partnership agreement and hoping to persuade the Government to accept a package of 30 regulatory and voluntary proposals that it maintains would have guaranteed a much better deal for the environment, its proposals have been rejected in favour of a tax.

It seemed rather unprincipled of the Government to encourage the Quarry Products Association to believe that if it came up with satisfactory answers that addressed the Government's objectives, no tax would be imposed. The other disappointment is that the tax will undoubtedly have serious ramifications throughout the economy. The tax will not differentiate between good and bad operators and provides no incentive to improve environmental performance.

I say that with some feeling, because the quarry on Clee hill last year won the civic trust award and a national quarry reclamation award for doing a very good job restoring quarry workings after they have been worked out. It is a slap in the face for the operators of that quarry and others who have worked hard to do the right thing by the environment to find that the proposals that they spent a lot of time, money and effort on have been rejected. They were given no reason to suspect that, like many other interest groups, they were being taken for a ride by the Government, who eventually imposed an aggregates tax on Budget day of £1.60 per tonne. The Quarry Products Association points out that many small operators working on a small profit margin will be at serious risk of closure, which would lead to job losses. I am concerned about that, because those jobs are very important in my constituency.

Where is the sense in the tax? Henceforth, every construction project in the land will cost more. Every new factory, every new house and every new Government building will cost more. Every mile of farm track or forestry access road will cost more. Maintaining and improving the permanent way on our railways will cost more. If they had one, the Government's roads programme would also cost more. Once again, the Government demonstrate their failure to understand that increased taxes and other cost and regulatory burdens imposed on the wealth-creating sector have consequences for the whole economy. I am sad that the Government have failed to recognise that imposing increased taxes on industry puts up costs and makes British companies less competitive.

The Clee hill quarry produces a category of stone that is shipped to south Wales, where it is converted into rockwool. As many hon. Members know, that is an insulating material. There seems to be a contradiction. The Government are imposing a tax on the quarrying industry, but at the same time they are intent on reducing VAT on energy-saving materials. The left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. That is an example of the law of unintended consequences.

Mr. David Heath: The hon. Gentleman is putting a powerful case that is shared by many of us who represent quarrying constituencies. Does he agree that his point could have been foreseen, because the Environmental Audit Committee drew attention to such perverse environmental consequences when we looked at the design of the tax?

Mr. Gill: I have a lot of sympathy with that point. As we get into the detail of the Bill, it becomes clear that the

imperative is to raise more revenue. I shall give an example in a moment of another industry that has argued a sound case for several years and thought that it was going to persuade the Government to see sense, but fell at the last hurdle.

The biggest employer in my constituency is the Lawson Marden Star aluminium factory at Bridgnorth. It will be subject to the full climate change levy, whereas the smelters in the aluminium industry will get a rebate. That is very much like the situation that the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central described in the glass industry, where the makers will get rebates but the benders will not.

It will be very difficult to draw hard and fast lines in the sand for individual industries that will be meaningful and, more to the point, fair and that, even more to the point, will not prejudice the jobs that the hon. Gentleman and I value so much in our respective constituencies. Very few businesses indeed will find that the reduction in employers national insurance comes anywhere near compensating them for the amount that they will have to pay out for the climate change levy. It is a bad tax and should be withdrawn.

I want to say a word about small independent brewers—including pub breweries—of which I have not a few in my constituency, such as the Three Tuns and the Six Bells at Bishop's Castle, the Sun at Corfton, the Crown at Munslow, Hobson's brewery at Cleobury Mortimer and the Wood brewery at Wistanstow. They might all have expected that the case for progressive beer duty put by the Society of Independent Brewers was so powerful and reasonable and such sheer common sense that the Government would accept it.

A letter from the general secretary of the Society of Independent Brewers shortly after the Budget said:

> We have overcome all the objections from government departments as to why PBD—

progressive beer duty—

> should not be introduced . . .

Just like the quarrying industry, the brewing industry found at the final hurdle that it could not persuade the Government to recognise the sound common sense of its case.

The Government are not friendly towards small businesses, as further evidenced by their obdurate refusal to listen to the voice of the Brewers and Licensed Retailers Association, which made the case that bootlegging of alcoholic drinks and tobacco is putting its members out of business. That was another point eloquently made by the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central.

Let us face facts. Six rural pubs per week are closing. They are not going out of business because of market forces but are being driven out of business by a Government obsessed with political correctness and spin, who have a cynical disregard for the bona fide traders who are entitled to believe that the law of the land—the criminal, civil and fiscal law—is on their side. There is a dawning realisation that, under this Government, it is not. I trust that that will be reflected in the ballot box at the next general election.

The quarry owners, the small brewers, the publicans, the newsagents and tobacconists and the sub-postmasters and mistresses are not the only ones to have been sidelined by the Chancellor. In his Budget speech, there was not a mention of farming, Britain's second biggest industry and one that is crucial in my constituency. After three years of Labour dither and delay, that industry is in desperate straits.

The Chancellor might have seen the good sense of reducing the duty on beer, to encourage its production and consumption in this country, as against all the alcoholic drinks that we import. Let us consider the spin-off to the farming industry. If it was required to produce more hops and malting barley, that would be a win-win situation for the brewers, the farmers and the consumers—it would be a virtuous circle—but instead we have the opposite and the Labour party is returning to tax and spend, and the devil take the hindmost.

The inexorable hike in road fuel duty does nothing to improve the rural economy. The Bill contains nothing for people in rural areas. The Chancellor may bluster that corporation tax and the standard rate of income tax have been reduced, and I applaud him for that, but that is no consolation to the road hauliers whose profits have evaporated, to the farmers who are driven to claim income support, or to the retailers who are forced to put up the shutters for the last time because the Government, far from running the bootlegger out of town, are driving the bona fide trader out of business.

I have deliberately concentrated on the effects on business, because there is no escaping the fact that without business there is no wealth creation, without wealth creation there are no jobs, and without jobs and wealth creation there is no money for the public sector.

8.5 pm

Liz Blackman (Erewash): I commend the Bill to the House. The Budget cannot be viewed in isolation from earlier Budgets. There is an interaction between this Finance Bill and those that have gone before it. Each Bill is a building block. Building blocks need firm foundations, and I want to hammer home the point that although when we took office in 1997 a frustrated electorate had tremendous aspirations and expectations that the Government would deliver all kinds of policies, it would have been very foolish to set off on a course that we could not deliver because of the weak footings that we inherited.

I was very interested to hear the speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). I fear that he was suffering from selective amnesia. When we took office in 1997, debt as a share of gross domestic product was far too high, at 44 per cent. He had made an attempt to bring the deficit down, but it was still £28 billion: inflation was rising, and he should have put up interest rates before the general election in May, but the issue was very politically sensitive at the time. I see a Conservative Member nodding in agreement.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz Blackman: Not just yet.

Inflation was rising when we took office, and we had to follow a more painful track in interest rates as a result. The House will recall that rates had been bobbing up and down furiously over many years leading up to 1997 and had reached the heady height of 15 per cent. How could businesses have operated in that climate? The fact is that they did not operate very successfully.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): As the hon. Lady would not give way to my hon. Friend

[Mr. Tim Loughton]

the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), who was nodding, can she point to a single speech made by her Labour colleagues before the general election suggesting that interest rates should go up? Will she acknowledge that interest rates have changed about 15 times over the past three years? What stability does that offer for business?

Liz Blackman: First, at the time to which the hon. Gentleman refers, we were not in government. On his second point, although interest rates have bobbed up and down recently, they have done so by quarter points within a very narrow band; at no point have they got anywhere near the 15 per cent. that we endured during the late 1980s and early 1990s. We will take no lessons from him.

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East) *rose—*

Liz Blackman: I want to make a little progress before I give way.

Before we could move forward on our priorities, we had to put the house in order. In three years, we have reduced debt as a proportion of GDP to 35 per cent. and what was then a deficit is now a surplus of £14 billion. We have substantially locked in those surpluses, and rightly so, given the strength of the economy.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz Blackman: No. The hon. Gentleman can make his own speech shortly.

In tandem, the Monetary Policy Committee, which was appointed early in the Government's life, has kept inflation bang on target at an average of 2.5 per cent. and has also kept interest rates within a narrow band. The shape of the economy is good—and that despite the fact that in 1998 we faced a severe contraction in economic activity in Asia, which is something that Opposition Members forget. The Opposition predicted recession, but it did not happen. That was not an accident: it was because the economy, and our fiscal and monetary policies, were working properly to ensure that we stayed on course.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Liz Blackman: I shall not give way, because I would like to make some progress. *[Interruption.]* I seem to be getting under the Opposition's skin, so I judge myself to be succeeding.

We are now three years down the line and into our third Finance Bill, and we have flagged up our priorities. The priority that is nearest and dearest to my heart is education. The state of education resourcing in Derbyshire in 1997 was diabolical. The reason for that was the vicious spending restrictions placed on the local authority by the then Government. Class sizes were at a record high and were some of the worst in the country. Buildings were falling apart and the situation was at rock bottom.

In recognition of Derbyshire's dire straits, it was the only authority that this Government allowed to breach its spending cap in the first year of this Parliament. It has since had generous slabs of ring-fenced funding: classrooms have been built; we have more teachers; roofs have been mended; the majority of schools in my constituency now have indoor toilets; and the literacy and numeracy strategies are working well.

The differential in funding between Derbyshire and other authorities is still of concern, because we are still at the bottom of the league. However, I congratulate the Government on re-examining the issue and on their commitment to try to get greater parity between authorities. That is not only an issue for me as a Derbyshire MP, but for other hon. Friends and Opposition Members.

Mr. Bercow: If the Government are doing as well on education expenditure as the hon. Lady claims, why is it that they have reduced the proportion of GDP spent on education from 5 per cent., as it was under the previous Government, to 4.7 per cent?

Liz Blackman: All I can say is that when I go round my constituency I see real and tangible results from spending, for the first time in many years. I see new classrooms, more teachers, new and renovated buildings. What is more, I see children following curriculums that are making progress for them so they will not reach secondary schools with poor reading and writing skills, as they were allowed to by the previous Government. That is the difference, and I can see it working in my constituency.

I also welcome the money that is to be given to the NHS. Again, my local health authority has done well out of the settlement in capital and in revenue. My constituency has two hospitals, and both are beneficiaries of the private finance initiative. That would never have happened under the previous Government, because not one hospital contract had been signed when we came to power in 1997.

The other NHS funding that I especially welcome is the money that is going direct to primary care groups, for which I have much sympathy because they are being asked to deliver the lion's share of the Government's agenda. The PCGs in my constituency have certainly welcomed the extra funding that will allow them to do that.

We have heard much about industry today, and of course it is the engine of a successful economy. The Treasury Committee has taken a lot of evidence about productivity, because it is strongly linked to business success. All our witnesses came to the same conclusion—the reason for the existence of such a wide productivity gap between this country and some of our European competitors and the United States was a structural lack of investment over many years. The policies in the current Finance Bill and in our previous Finance Bills, as welcomed by the Institute of Directors, will help to reverse that lack of investment. That is at the heart of raising productivity. I welcome the lowering of corporation tax, the permanence of the capital allowances, the reforms to the capital gains tax system, the research and development credits and the regional venture capital fund, of which the east midlands will now receive its share.

Underpinning all those factors is a stable economy. Businesses will not invest in an economy in which they have no confidence. Businesses have not invested

structurally in the past because Government policies did not encourage them to do so and also because they had no certainty about what the economy would be doing from one year to the next. That certainty now exists, so business investment has increased significantly since 1997. It is up 16.5 per cent. and inward investment is up 45 per cent.

Much has been said tonight about the manufacturing sector and the hard time that it is having exporting because of the level of the pound. However, Opposition Members cannot explain why when interest rates went down last year the level of the pound stayed the same. Neither the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe nor the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) could explain that. According to their argument, the pound should have fallen when interest rates were that bit lower last year, but it did not. The fact is that the euro is weak, but euro economies are recovering, especially France and Germany.

Mr. Edward Davey: Is the hon. Lady saying that fiscal policy has no effect on the exchange rate?

Liz Blackman: If any hon. Member can explain why the pound stayed at exactly the same level when interest rates went down last year, we might be able to have something of a debate, but the movement of the pound in relation to the euro is inexplicable not only to all the experts who have appeared before the Treasury Committee but to the Governor himself. If monetary policy had been relaxed with a significant impact on the level of the pound, we could argue some kind of cause and effect, but that has not been demonstrated.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz Blackman: No, I will not. The hon. Gentlemen can make their own speeches.

I turn now to the supply side and to the skills that are vital to improved output and productivity. The game is a long one, and I have talked already about investment and the effects that our policies and resourcing strategies are having. However, I also welcome the significant training programmes that the Government are putting in place, and the policy on lifelong learning.

My constituency has a skills shortage that was identified many years ago. I am delighted with the Government's new deal policies, under which youth unemployment and long-term unemployment have each been cut by 65 per cent. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary visited my constituency not so long ago and met a new dealer who was 58 years of age. Between the ages of 50 and 57, he was out of work and he never thought that he would work again. However, he got on the pilot new deal 50-plus scheme, and is now a really valued employee of the firm for which he works. I welcome the additional proposals to roll out the new deal 50-plus scheme across the country. It should be recognised that every section of society has a contribution to make, and my constituent has certainly made his.

All the measures that I have mentioned, together with the enhanced working families tax credit and the lower marginal rates of tax and national insurance, help to ensure that people are supported back into work. The 800,000 new jobs that have been created are testimony to that.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Liz Blackman: Finally, I want to say a few words about pensioners. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) congratulated the Government and welcomed the measures in the Bill that are targeted at pensioners. Some are aimed at poorer pensioners but others—such as the winter fuel allowance—are more universal. I have had discussions with pensioners in my constituency, and a couple of other points arise out of the representations that they made. I believe that the measures that we have taken are absolutely right, but even with the new savings thresholds that have been introduced, those pensioners just above the minimum income guarantee who have modest savings will not get the same benefits as those on the minimum income guarantee. I want more to be done for them, but the Government recognise that and I know that they are consulting on introducing more pensioner credits for that particular group. That is absolutely right.

Finally, when the Government flagged up the priorities of education and health, the Opposition said that our proposed investment in public spending was reckless. They were wrong. They foretold recession during the Asian crisis, and they were wrong. Some Opposition Members now endorse an investment strategy in public services, but they also urge the minimum tax guarantee—exactly the combination that will take the country back to the dire recession of the late 1980s: it would lead to the same disaster.

A well-managed economy allows us to pursue economic success, productivity, better public services, and fairness. All those objectives are inextricably linked.

8.24 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I shall not pick up the speech from the hon. Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) in detail, but I agree with what she said about the Government's treatment of pensioners. That story was told very dramatically by the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley), who is not in his place now. Some Labour Back Benchers are feeling very strongly the pressure being applied by pensioners. No doubt they will make known to the Government the dissatisfaction and unhappiness felt by pensioners at the weekend press reports about the Government abandoning the pensioner vote.

Where will that vote go? The Conservative party broke the link between pensions and earnings in 1981 and is unlikely to reap the harvest from pensioners. Clearly, my party will have to put up candidates throughout the United Kingdom.

During the Budget debate, I had the opportunity to touch on a number of issues. I described the effect on rural areas of increased petrol prices: I spoke about pensions, and I welcomed some of the provisions in the Budget, such as the policy for children. Today, therefore, I shall concentrate on three or four matters only.

Before I do so, however, I want to echo what some other hon. Members have said about the ridiculous size of the Bill. There are 558 pages, 150 clauses and

[Mr. Dafydd Wigley]

40 schedules. Schedule 6 alone covers 83 pages. It takes up about 4,000 lines and amounts to about 30,000 words. The Government say that that is not a problem, but it will be one in Committee: if only a minute is devoted to each line, consideration of the schedule would take up about 67 hours. Perhaps Labour Members want to spend their time in Committee like that, but I think that their enthusiasm will soon run dry.

We must think also of the people who have to live with the consequences of the Bill. There is a need for some stability and simplicity in the legislation, so that people can get their lives on a more even keel.

The hon. Member for Erewash presented the novel idea that interest rates have no bearing on the value of the pound. I am afraid that I do not entirely share that view.

Liz Blackman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that?

Mr. Wigley: No, the hon. Lady was not all that generous about giving way. I shall not be either.

The value of the pound is a central question, and the indications following the Budget are that the pressure on interest rates will be upwards. The hon. Member for Erewash may disagree, but I believe that that will cause the pound to strengthen. There is no doubt that a high pound is bad for the Welsh steel industry, which is facing a difficult time in the coming months, but it is bad too for the motor industry and for other industries throughout the country.

The high pound also has a devastating effect on farming. Imports are being sucked in, and it is impossible for our farmers to export goods. It is also very detrimental for tourism, an industry that is important to me and to many other hon. Members. The Government must deal with the problem and not just shrug it off and pass it over to the Bank of England.

The transfer to the Bank of England of responsibility for the level of the pound is all very well, but that responsibility ought to cover levels of employment as well as inflation. Both elements are important, and they should be dealt with side by side. I know that that conviction is shared by Labour Members, and perhaps by some in the Opposition parties.

Earlier in the debate, Labour Members boasted that public expenditure now takes up a smaller proportion of gross domestic product than in the past. I would like public expenditure to rise—on pensions, transport and housing, for example. Everyone knows that there is a need for money to be spent on renovating houses. I do not therefore consider falling public expenditure to be especially commendable.

However, the burden must be spread fairly throughout the community. Conservative Members continually refer to the wealth-creation sector of the economy, as if only businesses create wealth. Everybody who is in work is part of the wealth-creating sector of the economy. It is no use saying that people working in the national health service are not part of the productive wealth of the economy because it is a service, so called—of course they are. They make it possible for other people to do their work.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wigley: Let me finish my point first. A doctor in the private sector could be regarded as being in business and therefore wealth creating because he is paid out of profits, while a doctor in the public sector, who does not get paid in that way, could be regarded as a drain on the economy. That is clearly nonsense. We must consider the whole economy and everyone in it who is undertaking worthwhile work, whether it is productive or in the service sector, is part of that economy. It is not simply a question of the wealth-creating side of the economy in business, but of the whole economy, a fair burden of taxation and a fair level of expenditure on public services.

Mr. Geraint Davies: My point was that real increases in public expenditure can occur at the same time as a proportion of gross domestic product rises because the economy is growing. By how much does Plaid Cymru want to increase income tax so that public expenditure is increased to the desired rate?

Mr. Wigley: I will be coming on to that in a moment. However, I certainly would not have taken a penny off income tax at this time. That £2,600 million, or whatever such a move generates these days, would have been better used to help pensioners, transport and housing.

Mr. Bercow: The right hon. Gentleman talked about his desire for increased expenditure on housing. What assessment has he made of the effect of the change in the rules on the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt?

Mr. Wigley: That is one element, but a more fundamental question faces people who are waiting for renovation grants in the old industrial areas, not only in Wales, given the reduction in the money spent on housing by central Government. Obviously, there is an effect from the change mentioned by the hon. Gentleman in the funds that are available, but that is one among a number of elements which have undermined the rolling programme of house renovations. People in houses that are virtually unfit to live in may be waiting six, seven or 10 years, given the present level of expenditure, for renovation grants. They are often elderly people who do not, and will not, have the resources themselves. We need a new mechanism to bring finance into the housing sector, both public and private, to ensure that people have decent housing.

I shall turn briefly to regional policy. At the heart of what has been happening with interest rates and the higher level of the pound that has resulted has been the question of the differential heating up of the economy. There has been a problem in south-east England and no doubt in other parts of the country, such as south-east Wales. The economy in the Cardiff area may be heating up more than in other parts of Wales. That underlines the question of whether it is possible to have a mechanism, through

taxation of some other means, to stimulate economic development in slow areas and damp it down in areas that are overheating.

There was an attempt to do that in the 1960s, although it was not altogether successful. However, it is worth revisiting some of the ideas, such as the regional employment premium and selective employment tax. I am not sure about the selective employment tax, because that ossified industries in one direction. *[Interruption.]* I see the Chief Secretary putting his thumb down.

Mr. Bercow: It was the Labour Government—Harold Wilson.

Mr. Wigley: Yes, it was the Wilson Government, from 1966 to 1970, who introduced those proposals. The regional employment premium was, in concept, a devaluation, because it resulted in more purchasing power in the region. If we are not to have the strong investment programmes that many of us would like, there must be some fiscal approach along these lines.

Within the rules of the European Union, if it is possible to have plus or minus 2 per cent. around value added tax rates, is it possible to consider having differential VAT rates as one way of stimulating the economy a little in some areas and damp it down in others? I believe that such a mechanism needs to be considered if we are to make progress. It is possible in areas with objective 1 status, some of which are lived in by the poorest people in these islands. I refer to Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Cornwall, west Wales and the valleys. It is possible to use operating aid—as has happened in other parts of Europe which have objective 1 assistance—to have a lower level of employers' national insurance premium as a mechanism with which to stimulate the economy in those areas. I know that the Department of Trade and Industry and probably the Treasury were looking at that idea last year, and I think that it was rejected. However, I believe that similar mechanisms should be considered if we are to avoid an even worse polarisation between areas doing relatively well and those in parts of Wales, the north of England and Scotland that are not doing so well. I hope that such mechanisms will be considered by this time next year, even if it is not possible to do so in the context of this Finance Bill.

How do we pay for such adjustments? If I want to spend more money in certain areas, I need to put forward funding proposals. For example, I would remove the cut-off on the top level of employee national insurance premiums. It is ridiculous to have a cut-off that means that the marginal rate, taking the combined rate of income tax and national insurance, for someone earning £10,000 is 32 per cent., whereas for somebody earning £28,000 a year, the rate is 22 per cent. That is not sensible, and a combined upper rate of 50 per cent. rather than 40 per cent. for those on higher earnings would be acceptable and would bring in resources. Such steps need to be taken.

The provisions for the climate change levy have been mentioned by a number of speakers and are clearly causing considerable worry. The measure will not achieve what it was meant to achieve. The levy is not a carbon tax, and it is too blunt an instrument to result in the benefits in climate change at which it should be aiming. A number of right hon. and hon. Members will have received a letter from the plastic industry saying that the measure's impact on electricity alone would cost the industry £60 million a year. We need to reconsider the issue. It will be a body blow to many companies, and they will not be able to change overnight.

Following the statement this afternoon by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, I asked what criteria would be used to decide on the exemptions of the combined heat and power projects from the climate change levy. He referred me to the Treasury Front Bench. I have looked carefully through schedule 6 and at paragraphs 20 and 21. All I can find is a provision in paragraph 20(1) stating:

> The Commissioners may by regulations make provision for giving effect to the exclusions and exemptions . . .

There is no clarification on that issue.

Mr. Letwin: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the main deficiency of the climate change levy is that, for the first time in British taxation history, an arbitrary tax—the discounts for which will be decided by individual civil servants in negotiation with particular companies—has been introduced by a Government?

Mr. Wigley: Much work will be needed in Committee on the 83 pages of that schedule. The most worrying aspect of the tax is its impact, but there is also its uncertainty—for example, whether exemptions will be allowed or not. That is open-ended—to say the least. The matter will need clarification. People have a right to know not only who is administering the tax, but on what basis such taxation will be undertaken. We need some certainty in planning for the future.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury would be surprised if I did not return to the point that I made earlier during an intervention on his speech: I referred to the way in European structural funding would be carried out. Understandably, in his reply, the right hon. Gentleman pointed out that the matter would be sorted out in the comprehensive spending review. I am sure that the Government have good intentions in that regard; we all look forward to its being sorted out during years 2 to 7 of their programme. However, that still leaves this year—2000–01 will not be covered by the CSR.

In Wales, £25 million was built into our budget for this year's spend, against a possible spend of up to £368 million. Clearly, that would not happen, but there is the expectation of a spend of between £50 million and £100 million. For example, a development fund could call up 7 per cent. of the total structural funds for Wales—£1.2 billion under objective 1—within the first two years; that would be about £40 million a year. That money could be available for small businesses in Wales. However, there is only £25 million in our budget, which has to cover not only the match funding but the European money itself; under the present mechanism, the European money goes to the Treasury. Yes, it is passed over when projects are developed, but the amount is knocked off the Barnett block. We gain with one hand, but we lose with the other so we are no better off.

This year, if we find that expenditure runs beyond that £25 million in our budget, will it be possible to go into the contingency reserve—not only for Wales, but for other areas that might be affected—to ensure that we do not lose out on the objective 1 programme? The Government have worked hard to obtain that programme for Wales;

[Mr. Wigley]

we certainly need it in areas of high unemployment and low per capita income. It would be a tragedy if we missed out. I hope that the Chief Secretary will reflect on that during the coming weeks, and that he will be able to give a positive response in due course—for this financial year and not just for the next.

8.41 pm

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Hon. Members have the opportunity on too few occasions to consider the broad sweep of economic and public finance policy. However, the Second Reading of the Finance Bill provides just such an opportunity. During the many hours of debate, I have been struck by the fact that Opposition Members have apparently forgotten some of the fundamental tenets of economic policy—one of which must surely be that, to spend money on public services, revenue must be raised.

The right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) seemed to want to stop fiscal loosening. On the other hand, they said that we should spend much more money on pensioners and health, but failed to point out how on earth such measures would be funded. Such irresponsibility persuades no one of the merits of their case.

Conversely, the Conservatives suggest that, somehow, they can reduce taxation—to stop raising revenue—while magically continuing to maintain expenditure on vital public services. My constituents—indeed, the wider public—are neither stupid or naive; they will not be fooled by that poor arithmetic. They know about the basic sums in public finance and that, to pay for important services, we must have a secure revenue base.

Building on the progress that we have already made, the Finance Bill goes a long way towards securing a healthy set of public finances to pay for those important public services that we all need and that Labour Members are ensuring that we deliver, step by step.

I have a few brief observations on the Bill; the first focuses on the vital public service of health. The Budget measures on tobacco duty have come in for some criticism. However, I am proud to defend such measures, which use policy to target a demerit product—one that has a greatly adverse effect on our many constituents who smoke. The 5 per cent. real increase in tobacco duty will discourage people from smoking. Furthermore, that expenditure will bolster expenditure on the national health service—it will go towards the extra £2 billion allocated to the NHS during the financial year 2000–01. In my health authority area, the Bradford and Airedale hospitals will receive a 9.3 per cent. cash increase in one year. That is a massive increase; it will take local spending to £344 million.

All this will have a considerable impact. The money will not be set aside; it will be spent on cancer services, on reducing waiting times, on vital services provided by doctors and hospitals, and at the front line. The Bill well illustrates cause and effect—where the revenue is raised and the purposes for which it is spent.

The Bill will bring significant benefits to business. The 100 per cent. allowance for small firms for information technology will be broadly welcomed throughout industry, but there are also small but significant measures such as the abolition of stamp duty on intellectual property transactions and the simplification of the capital gains system.

These are important measures. While Opposition Members criticise the length of the Bill, we should be focusing on its outcome. That is what matters most, and I do not at all mind standing here, even though it might be a quarter to nine at night, enacting these measures and putting the Finance Bill on the statute book.

Many important measures in the Bill, such as the closure of several tax loopholes, illustrate the fact that the Government are anxious to achieve fairness across the board for taxpayers, and to ensure that a few people cannot get away with paying less than their fair share.

The other side of the coin is that the Bill provides a package of very significant new measures to help charitable giving, such as those making payroll deduction much easier and lifting the threshold on gift aid. Those measures will have a real impact.

I have heard criticisms tonight about the climate change levy, but we must not forget the wider environmental context in which these measures come into being. My mailbag does not contain as much criticism of the measure as do those of Opposition Members. However, people are writing to me about the floods in Bangladesh and Mozambique and the famine in Ethiopia—areas where adverse weather conditions have created devastation for very many millions of people—caused, we can now safely assume, by emissions of too much carbon into the atmosphere.

We must do something about that, and that is what the climate change levy is about. It is not imposed for and of itself. Moreover, it is revenue-neutral; the money is paid back through the national insurance system. I am glad that the Government have made concessions, especially to energy-intensive industries. The aim is to reduce our carbon emissions, meet our environmental commitments and, ultimately, do the right thing for the world. It is unwise to lose sight of those important aspects.

When the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) was criticising the Government on several grounds, he mentioned that an extra £2 billion was being spent on central Government administration. When I—from a sedentary position, I admit—balked slightly at the scale of his allegation, I was castigated for not referring to page 60 of Command Paper 4601, which he thought proved his case.

I have taken the liberty of referring to the Library and asking for an opinion on the matter. The figures in the document show that the right hon. Gentleman was referring to the cash figures, without taking into account inflation in wage costs. He tried to imply that we could consider the matter purely in cash terms. If we consider the figures in real terms, which we should all accept as the best way of measuring such matters—*[Interruption.]* That is interesting; Conservative Members seem to be suggesting that they do not believe that we should use real-terms figures to consider such matters. The figures for the final year of the Conservative Administration, when compared with the figures for central Government

administrative expenditure projected for next year, show that the Labour Government will spend £137 million less in real terms.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman read out what happened in cash terms under the Conservative Administration?

Mr. Leslie: I shall read out the fair terms, which are the real-terms figures. For example, in 1994–95, the figure was £15,000 million compared with £14,186 million for the financial year of 2001–02. That represents a reduction in real terms. It does Conservative Members no good at all to scrabble around to try to find ways to pay for their ridiculous tax guarantee, or spending cuts guarantee as it should be called. They suggest that somehow they can stretch expenditure to cover myriad issues. The hon. Gentleman suggested that they would not only spend on health and education, but that he wanted additional expenditure on defence and to prevent crime. Those areas make up 40 per cent. of public expenditure, yet he believes that we could see a real growth in expenditure on them above the rate of increase in the GDP. He believes that he can sustain such increases in expenditure while simultaneously reducing taxation. That is not feasible unless there are swingeing cuts in other services.

Mr. Letwin: Has the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to look at the Red Book? If he has, has he noticed that that he has described precisely the oddity that the Chancellor of the Exchequer predicts?

Mr. Leslie: If the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is working in line with the Conservative party's distorted policy of a tax—or public service cuts—guarantee, he cannot have been paying too much attention. Given his suggestion that public expenditure should increase significantly in real terms and that tax should be reduced by enormous amounts, what would he cut? As he has said that he does not agree with borrowing, there would have to be cuts in international development aid, the transport budget, pensions, child benefits, disabled benefits and myriad other services.

Mr. Letwin: Is the hon. Gentleman now denying the proposition that the Chief Secretary has repeatedly made in the House: that, in the Chancellor's plans in the Red Book, tax will fall as a percentage of GDP for several years?

Mr. Leslie: The hon. Gentleman should realise that his proposal is for the lifetime of a Parliament, but I know that there is a rumour that the shadow Chancellor is considering changing that proposal so that it falls into line with the economic cycle. The hon. Gentleman is right in so far as the Government will reduce the burden of taxation, but we correctly consider such matters over cycles and by examining the needs and the demands of the public sector and what we need to spend. We are not driven by the ridiculous dogmatic guarantee that would set in concrete a notional level of revenue reduction regardless of economic circumstances. That would continually force enormous cuts in the public services that the Conservatives say are not crucial. However, many of my constituents would say that public expenditure on matters such as international development, agriculture and trade and industry is important. We all know that the Conservatives would cut that enormously.

When I examined other statements on expenditure made by the Conservative party, I noticed that it had made significant new spending—and not just tax reduction—commitments. For example, the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman on education wants to reinstate the assisted places scheme, albeit in a new form, which would cost many millions of pounds. The Conservatives want to restore the married couples allowance. Their home affairs spokesman wants to increase the police fund grant by about 6.1 per cent. They want to increase funding for ambulance services: the Conservative Whip here now, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran), has said in the past that he wants greater expenditure on ambulance services in his area. The shadow transport team wants higher spending on train station car parks, and has even spoken of free shares for all who live in London under the privatisation of London Underground.

All those commitments have implications for public expenditure. People will not believe that the Conservatives could deliver their promises while simultaneously reducing taxation, without resorting to borrowing and adding to the national debt. That was their strategy during the 1980s, and we experienced the consequences of that.

Mr. Edward Davey: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen do not appear to know whether their tax guarantee is a guarantee to reduce taxes over the lifetime of a Parliament, or over an economic cycle? Would he care to comment on that?

Mr. Leslie: For once, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Conservatives' confusion is somewhat disturbing, even though it is also quite hilarious from our point of view. It demonstrates how there is no chance that the Conservatives will be trusted by the electorate, who will not have the wool pulled over their eyes. The electorate know about the balance of public finances and they know the difference between a realistic pledge and an unrealistic one. It is all very well for the Conservatives to give guarantees, but it is a sorry sight for voters to see the Conservatives trying to wriggle out of those guarantees only months later.

My constituents will benefit significantly from the Budget and the Bill. We shall be able to deliver results locally. Progress will accelerate on a new road scheme worth £60 million in my constituency: the Bingley relief road. Thanks to the Government, there will be new school buildings at Cullingworth school, Beckfoot school, Bingley grammar school and Salt grammar school, paid for out of public funds. There will be new train rolling stock with extra carriages so that people are not crammed together at peak times. There will be a new accident and emergency wing at Bradford Royal infirmary. All those important local services will be delivered, thanks to the Government's careful and prudent management of the public finances.

The Government have focused on stability and on ensuring that we get the fiscal balance right, while targeting assistance through tax cuts. They have always borne in mind the fact that a responsible Government have to balance revenue against expenditure. That is what my constituents want. I hope that the Bill receives the support of the House.

8.58 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Originally, I was going to say something about macro-economic policy and take only an oblique look at the fiscal measures. However, having had a good look at the Bill over the past 48 hours, I have decided to spend some time talking about the climate change levy.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the levy is the most astonishing measure that I have ever seen in a Finance Bill. Set out over the 83 pages of schedule 6, it is a most unusual provision. No clear explanation has been provided of why the measure has been introduced, nor of how it is to be applied. It is a poorly designed levy and poorly thought through. What was the ostensible reason for the levy, and what is it designed to achieve? I can only assume that it has been introduced because the Government have swallowed whole every assertion made by those who argue that we must act now to arrest climate change.

I have asked the Library whether, since the general election, the Government have produced a study setting out their view of the conclusions of the Kyoto summit, the extent to which they agree with them or the extent, perhaps, to which they feel that we should go further. The Government have published nothing on those lines. Nor have they called together a group of scientists to publish an independent report, as far as I know.

I do not know whether climate change is a serious problem. However, over the past 48 hours, I have started to read up about it again. With the Finance Bill, we could find ourselves at the start of what will amount to a fundamental alteration of the shape of the economy to take account of climate change without many of the basic questions about it being answered. I shall ask a few of those questions now.

My interest in these matters was first triggered 10 years ago when I went to a lecture by Sir John Mason, the head of the Meteorological Office, who more or less destroyed the argument that climate change was occurring as a consequence of carbon dioxide emissions. Since then, he has modified his views somewhat, but, apparently, he still holds to many of his basic points. As I have said, I do not know the answers to these matters, but as I think that they are pertinent to schedule 6, I shall ask six or seven basic questions and make some brief allusions to them. I urge the Government to produce a thorough study of these matters before putting the Bill on the statute book.

Let us try a really basic question. Is global warming occurring? That might be thought a most absurd question because the answer is so obvious. Over the past 20 years, statistics have shown that the surface temperature of the planet has risen between 0.3 and 0.8 points of a degree celsius. However, reading over the weekend, I discovered that satellite measures of the temperature of the earth show no rise. There are many scientists who think that such measurements are more accurate than terrestrial measures. Balloons called radiosonde are also used to measure temperature. They, too, have failed to find any increase in global temperature over the past 20 years. If I had to guess, I would say that the planet probably is increasing in temperature, but I really do not know.

I shall try another basic question. Has the planet been warmer than it is now? I quickly discovered that it has been much warmer. In the middle ages, grapes were apparently cultivated along the south coast to produce wine. There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that this part of the world, and probably the whole world, has been warmer than it is now. It was probably warmer in Roman times. There was also a mini-ice age in the 17th century.

Even if the earth is warming, is that necessarily bad? I have seen no convincing evidence to suggest that it is. It is clear that there will be a distributional effect from one region to another. However, it is not clear that, overall, the earth will be worse off if temperatures rise.

Will warming lead to more unstable weather? The Deputy Prime Minister has been unequivocal about that. He has stated that

> we can expect extreme weather events to become more frequent . . . as temperatures rise.

When I read the evidence of the experts at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, I discovered that some of them strongly disagree with that view. They think that increases in temperature will lead to a smaller differential between the poles and the equator and that that will reduce extreme weather events. Again, I do not know whether that is true. I merely beg right hon. and hon. Members to read some of the literature that is available, which is by no means clear cut on these matters.

Mr. Love: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he disagreeing with the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) who, in his speech this afternoon, committed the Opposition to the Kyoto targets?

Mr. Tyrie: Commitments, once made, should be honoured. The Kyoto targets are probably quite manageable, possibly without a levy, as several Labour Members have said this evening. The question that I am raising is whether the general philosophy behind the objective that the levy is designed to achieve is right. I am not suggesting for a moment that I have the answers. I am suggesting that we should not rely exclusively on work done by a United Nations working group. There should be intensive study and debate on climate change by the Government before we fundamentally change the structure of British industry to take account of it, which is the long-term implication of a levy.

I shall ask a few more questions, to which I also do not know the answer. If there is global warming, is it caused by human activity—in other words, is it anthropomorphic? The former Economic Secretary was clear about that. She said unequivocally:

> We cannot doubt that climate change is the result of human activity.—[*Official Report*, 20 July 1999; Vol. 335, c. 1040.]

She was presumably referring to the only solid statement made on the matter by the IPCC, which noted in its report:

> Observations suggest a discernible human influence on climate change.

That is rather weak wording on which to base a drastic change of economic and industrial policy.

As far as I can tell from the literature, there is no clear evidence that humans are the exclusive or even the major cause of climate change, if indeed it is taking place. There are many learned tracts suggesting that variations in radiation from the sun are the main cause of variations in the weather. Moreover, a good number of models are being developed suggesting that climate change is endogenous to the planet.

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman is advancing an extraordinary thesis, which I have not often heard before.

What amount of evidence would satisfy him that measures are necessary? Even if he has doubts, is it not reasonable to err on the side of caution, before we lose atolls, islands and icebergs all over the world?

Mr. Tyrie: The hon. Lady mentions icebergs. The evidence that the polar ice caps are disintegrating in the long run is weak. Sir John Mason made it clear in his lecture that he found the evidence extremely unreliable. If I had time, I would read his lecture out to the House.

I suggest to the hon. Lady and to the House that we need to think carefully about these issues, before making drastic changes. I have not yet been convinced that the right course is to try to lower CO_2 emissions to the point at which the models would start to predict that the earth was no longer warming. There may be other courses of action that we should take. I shall come on to those in a moment.

It is clear that the planet has changed temperature many times, both up and down, well before any power stations were built, so we know that climate change can take place endogenously, as I suggested.

Let us now make a few assumptions. Let us suppose that there is global warming, which is a reasonable assumption. Let us suppose that we are causing it, which looks a little less reasonable; that we are causing it through carbon emissions; and that it is resulting in a great deal of net harm to the planet. We ought to examine all those assumptions carefully.

The next question, which again does not seem to have been asked by the Government, is: should we adapt to the change in climate or should we try to reverse it? As I mentioned, the main effect of a change in the climate is likely to be distributional—it impoverishes some areas and enriches others. There is a deal of evidence to suggest that an increase in the temperature of the planet will increase overall precipitation, and therefore increase the overall fertility of the inhabited areas of the globe, even though there will be some land loss, as the hon. Lady suggested when she envisaged sea levels rising.

I do not know the answer to all those questions; I am not an expert. However, it is worth asking whether we should respond to such an event by accepting that some land loss will occur and deciding to build better sea defences, or by trying to devise some distributional mechanisms whereby the impoverished regions benefit from the areas that are enriched by global change. We should also consider whether it is worth trying to change the climate of the planet. That is a big undertaking, which we need to be clear that we need to achieve.

If we conclude that we want to change the temperature of the planet, it is important that most of us are on side and working on the same project. There is a major problem with the CO_2 emissions project. Although the Chinese have signed up to Kyoto, it is widely argued that they are not likely to implement it; the United States, which is responsible for the most CO_2 emissions, has not even agreed to sign it. Upwards of half of the total global emissions of CO_2 are from those two large countries, which do not seem to support the policy. It is dangerous to take such a step almost alone. As in other matters, Britain will honour its commitments more vigorously than many other countries that have signed agreements.

The Bill introduces a massive new tax; in the long term, the Government plan to restructure British industry. If they are not planning to do that, they are not tackling the problem but paying lip service to it. Therefore, one can assume that the measure creates a new tax base on which the Government clearly intend to build in the long run.

I implore the Government to establish a high- powered committee, possibly a royal commission, to examine urgently the issues that I have raised, and to develop a British, considered view of global warming and ways in which to tackle it. No British Government have done that, but such action is urgently required.

We have accepted too many arguments on the nod, without further careful examination. I stress that I do not claim that global warming is a load of nonsense. I genuinely do not know the answers to the questions that I have posed, but I believe that we should work on the best evidence available before implementing the tax. That is the biggest single reason for my caution about the levy.

Let us consider the levy in detail. What does it propose? It does not directly affect carbon emissions. It is a downstream levy because the Government want to avoid a direct effect on consumers. It is an energy, not a carbon tax. Its guns are therefore pointing in the wrong direction. It will damage several successful industries, including British Steel. Brian Moffatt said:

> It will close plants, which will be replaced by inefficient plants in other parts of the world.

In other words, net global CO_2 emissions from the steel industry are likely to increase as a result of the proposals.

Let us consider the liquid petroleum gas industry; the Calor gas industry. It will be badly hit, despite being the most CO_2 friendly industry in the sector. It would be replaced by burning hydrocarbon oils; CO_2 emissions will consequently increase.

The list of potentially affected industries is endless. Several have already been mentioned. They include the renewables industry, aluminium, glass—the hon. Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) mentioned the effect on the glass industry in his constituency. In my constituency, I have a horticulture industry, which would be badly hit. It is ironic that the levy will hit those industries that are most exposed to international competition. It is therefore likely that we will force the industries offshore, and the net effect on global CO_2 emissions will be zero or even negative. Eastern Europe, which has inefficient plants for a wide variety of industries, will benefit from that.

Most extraordinary of all, the tax will be collected unlike any other, without a degree of certainty and on the basis of negotiation. It is discretionary and subject to what are described in schedule 6 as "umbrella agreements". There is no precedent for such negotiations on the collection of a tax or for empowering civil servants to negotiate with firms and agree their tax liabilities. Nor should politicians have that power. Therefore, I am deeply concerned about the Bill on that point of principle.

Altogether, the structure of the tax is a right mess. In fact, I have not seen such a right mess since I looked at the poll tax in about 1985. I do not know whether we need the tax to fulfil the Kyoto targets, but my guess is that we probably do not, given that the Government have shown the common sense today to drop the gas moratorium. If more is needed—I said that we should fulfil our international obligations—we could think of far better ways, far less damaging to British industry, than the Government's extraordinary proposals.

I said that I would say a few words about macro-economic policy, and there will be only a few, given the time available. I want to make two points by asking

[Mr. Tyrie]

questions. First, is fiscal policy tight enough to enable monetary policy to be relaxed? Everyone feels that, if we could engineer it, we should like some relaxation. That is the current mantra. I am not entirely convinced, but there is a case for it. If looser monetary conditions were achieved, the exchange rate could fall and the imbalance between the service and manufacturing sectors would be easier to handle.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) argued in his first speech after the Budget that the Budget was tight. In his second, he argued that it was loose. He was more or less right the second time; it represents a loosening of policy. I cannot help feeling a resonance from events in the late 1980s when I was in the Treasury. What do we have? A brittle stock market, a bit of a housing boom after a long period of growth and some talk from the Government about how to end the business cycle—the end of boom and bust. There was talk of that then, but there is more now. I regret that Nigel Lawson let that phrase slip on one occasion, although he quickly tried to back-track later. Labour has not yet realised that it will have to do that. There was a debate about whether fiscal policy was too loose. We were addressing exactly those questions in the late 1980s. The situation is not so primed for as big a boom and bust, but several of the conditions are evident right now.

No Government can afford to ignore the value of the exchange rate for ever—at least, no Government of a small or medium-sized country. At any rate, it is extremely difficult to manage an economy without giving some consideration to the exchange rate. I am sure that, sooner or later, the Government will realise that they will want to tighten fiscal policy to get the exchange rate to an appropriate level and to enable the Monetary Policy Committee to find the room to make the necessary changes to interest rate policy that would enable the exchange rate to fall.

Mr. Love *rose—*

Mr. Tyrie: I give way to the hon. Gentleman for a second time.

Mr. Love: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. How does he square the fiscal tightening of which he talks with the Conservative amendment and the tax guarantee about which Conservative Members talk so much?

Mr. Tyrie: I do not have the amendment in front of me, but the Red Book suggests a loosening of policy. If anything, fiscal policy should be tightened. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, in my remaining minute I shall not go into the territory of the tax guarantee, although I am fascinated by tax guarantees and would love to debate them on another occasion.

I want to make another brief point by asking a question. Could the announced spending increases be sustained in the event of a downturn in economic activity? That is the other big question about the Budget and there are two pointers as to why that might not be the case. The first is the growth forecast. The whole Red Book is based on a forecast of above-trend growth, followed by our slipping back to trend growth; nowhere is there even the hint of an idea that we might be below trend.

Some Front Benchers are mathematicians, and will know that trends are averages: there must be a period a bit below the trend for there to be a period a bit above it. The Government's, it appears, is a unique trend, in that there is never anything below the line. That is a problem for the Government. If there is any downturn below trend, the numbers in the Red Book simply will not add up.

The second factor that should be taken into account in an assessment of whether the spending can be afforded is the net borrowing figure. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), who is grunting on the Front Bench, looks at page 146 of the Red Book, he will see that the rise in net borrowing is very fast over the planning period. That, I think, gives cause for concern.

The structure of the economy is still sound, but it is slowly being chipped away. The Chancellor has taken risks, partly for electoral purposes. He is fuelling the beginnings of a political cycle with his fiscal policy, and in that sense he is undermining the good work that he did when he tried to dissociate politics from the business cycle by making the Bank of England independent.

9.21 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I am sure that all Members will join me in welcoming the tremendous improvement in the performance of the UK economy since 1992. As I think everyone knows, and as the Prime Minister has implicitly admitted, this is essentially the result of the supply-side reforms of the 1980s, the development of a venture capital industry, the return to entrepreneurship, and the key measures introduced by the Thatcher Administration.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that between 1990–91 and 1996–97 net debt as a percentage of gross domestic product grew from 27 to 44 per cent? Am I not right in saying that if the Tories ever returned to office with their tax guarantee, all that would happen would be more and more borrowing, more and more debt, and the indebtedness—again—of the British economy?

Mr. Flight: It is about time that the hon. Gentleman matured a little. I was referring to the growth rates that have been achieved and the new industries that have developed. Indeed, comments made by the Prime Minister—the leader of the hon. Gentleman's own party—underline much of what the Government have done and most of the reasons why Labour has changed its spots so dramatically.

What has happened in this country and in America, and to a lesser extent in Europe, has been very much the result of supply-side improvements.

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Flight: No. *[Interruption.]* I ask the hon. Gentleman not to interrupt. I said that I would not give way.

The Chancellor has made an ill-conceived attempt to take credit for the good performance of the UK economy and for what we all hope will continue to be good growth rates during forthcoming years. He is also unwise to believe that he has abolished the business cycle, for

reasons that have been illustrated by recent events in the stock markets, and also for reasons given by my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie).

I feel that the general thrust of the Budget is somewhat mistaken. The International Monetary Fund has said that it is uncomfortable about the Government's decision, at this stage in the cycle, to increase fiscal expenditure by some £4 billion over 2001–02, and by £15 billion by 2003–04. The IMF is saying implicitly that the Government run the risk of creating a return to boom and bust. That, too, was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester.

I am, however, more worried by the fact that the overall thrust of the current Administration continues to be more Government involvement, more Government expenditure and higher taxes to finance this. In July 1998, the Chancellor lectured us about the great virtues of prudence and said that he would stick to his three-year spending targets, but, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) said, he has thrown that out of the window with the current Budget without a by-your-leave.

I also point out to the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) that the last Conservative Administration did freeze Government expenditure: it was at £13.3 billion in cash terms in 1994–95 and £13.29 billion by 1997–98. It has increased by £2 billion in cash terms since then.

Mr. Leslie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Flight: No, I will not. We have debated the issue.

Mr. Leslie *rose—*

Mr. Flight: Come on then.

Mr. Leslie: Will the hon. Gentleman admit that, when looking at central Government expenditure, it is better—he should suggest it to the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory)—to use real terms than cash terms? They show that the present Government are reducing those costs.

Mr. Flight: It is rational to look at both, but the point that I was making was that in the last three years of the previous Administration, there was prudent economy in managing Government expenditure: we held the sum in cash terms.

The truth, as the electorate is becoming increasingly aware, is that the Government have put up taxes by the equivalent of 8p on income tax. The average family is paying some £13 a week, or £670 a month, more. Perhaps they would not mind if the delivery of services improved, but, as women in our community in particular are well aware, class sizes and waiting lists are up, police numbers are down and crime is rising. It is the failure to deliver which we attack and over which the Administration are increasingly being rumbled.

The pledge was simple: taxation was not going to be increased at all; education and health were going to have a lot more spent on them and to be greatly improved; and the economies were going to come from reductions in the social security budget. The reality is that the latter is going up by some £30 billion over the current Parliament.

Both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury have continued to reveal a somewhat compulsive addiction to presenting incomplete data—and indeed, on some occasions, perhaps unwittingly, an addiction to misrepresenting data—and to hiding fiscal nasties as far as possible from Parliament. It is no accident that the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce commented on the recent Budget:

> It is becoming incredibly difficult for Business to match the Rhetoric with the Reality.

The Budget is again full of stealth taxes. There are the double tax treaty treatment of proposals relating to mixer companies, the further increase in stamp duty, and the new car tax, which is almost impossible for anyone to understand but adds significantly to taxation where employers provide cars. There are the coming aggregates tax, the climate levy tax and the extra duty on tobaccoes and fuel.

The biggest of the lot is not even in the Bill: IR35, which is budgeted to add some £900 billion of revenue. [HON. MEMBERS: "£900 billion?"] Would that the Government were so lucky—I mean £900 million of revenue. There are also national insurance contributions applying to venture capital companies on the exercise of employee share options.

The Government have taxed pensions, business, insurance contracts, the self-employed and enterprise. As the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) has pointed out, through their changes to the capital gains tax regime they have created something that is impossibly complicated for ordinary citizens to deal with. Allegedly, the Government are providing incentives to companies to make available shares to individuals who work in those companies, which Conservative Members welcome greatly, but the tax effects of the Bill as it stands are mind-blowingly complicated for such individuals.

Mr. Gardiner: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept and welcome the fact that capital gains tax has been cut to the lowest level not only that this country has ever seen but in the western economy? Does he not recognise that the simplicity of planning over a four-year cycle—knowing that capital gains tax will be at 10 per cent. after four years—is welcomed by businesses up and down the country?

Mr. Flight: Germany has no long-term capital gains tax and the rate in the United States is lower. I certainly welcome the cuts, but my criticism was of the complications.

I turn to the change in the double taxation treaty. The last time that the issue was raised, I felt that the Chief Secretary cast an improper slur on Mr. Peter Wyman. It has emerged since that the mean of the forecasts of all the leading accounting firms is that the tax will raise at least £3 billion as it stands and make the United Kingdom the least attractive place among the main economies of the world to base multinationals headquarters.

Is the Paymaster General aware that a main story in *The Times* tomorrow is that Allied Zurich plc will be moving its headquarters from the UK and that there will be a loss of £100 million of taxation to the Revenue as a result? I would be interested to hear what the Government have to say to that.

[Mr. Flight]

More particularly, and following Dame Sheila Masters' comments, we would like to know whether the Government will stick with the proposals or whether, as virtually all industry, accountants and so forth have advised, they will be going back to the drawing board. If they do not do so, they will simply succeed in driving multinationals from this country. Indeed, almost as if we are returning to the days of Harold Wilson and the brain drain, this Government seem determined to drive small businesses out of the country with IR35, and large businesses out of the country with the double taxation proposals.

I turn to fuel duty and allowances. At the most recent Treasury Question Time, I asked the Paymaster General why the inflation indexation applying to fuel was 3.4 per cent. but for pensions and allowances it was only a 1.2 per cent. She responded—I felt slightly patronisingly—that as I had not been in government, I would not understand such things. The truth is that, right down to the last Conservative Budget, the same inflation base was used for both allowances and the fuel escalator. It is only as a result of this Administration increasing the duty on fuel four times over three years that they have moved the inflation index for fuel to the forecast rate. Indeed, I discovered another stealth tax in that, where the forecast has proved to be larger than the actual, no adjustment has been made in the following year's duty.

There have been four increases in stamp duty for properties worth more than £250,000 over the past three years. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe pointed out, that is a virtual tripling and quadrupling of stamp duty. The Government no doubt like to think that that is a pleasant major stealth tax on the well-off, but I remind them that £250,000 is the average price for a normal, family semi-detached home in London. The duty is an unfair tax on people in the south-east, who may have to move because of their job. It will discourage older people from vacating larger properties, thus adding to the demand for more houses on greenfield sites. It is similarly a burden on business.

Mr. Love: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the increase in stamp duty for houses worth more than £250,000 applies to only 4 per cent. of residential property?

Mr. Flight: The main point is that the tax covers businesses, but as I pointed out and as the hon. Gentleman is no doubt aware, the cost of an average, perfectly unfancy family home in London is now around such a price.

Opposition Members welcome the Government's proposals to increase the tax breaks on giving to charities. However, the value of those proposals is a good deal less than the full cost to charities of the abolition of advance corporation tax, which will come into effect in 2004. Additionally, the Government have failed to deal with the major problem of value added tax paid by charities.

We broadly welcome the Government's venture capital and enterprise measures. It is a pity, however, that the impact of those measures is substantially undone by measures in other spheres, particularly IR35.

I should like to tell the Paymaster General of the case of one of my constituents and the reason why IR35 is not merely a tightening-up on tax avoidance arrangements. My constituent is typical of the 60,000 information technology subcontractors who have been persuaded to subcontract at the prompting of the main company for which they work. His complaint is that the limit on expenses will cost him an extra £5,000 annually. He has annual revenues of £60,000, and his legitimate expenses—depreciation, accounting, travel and supplies—amount to £11,000 per annum. At the 5 per cent. limit, he is permitted only £3,000 per annum of tax-deductible expenses. He will therefore have to find £8,000 of expenses out of after-tax income. That has to be wrong. No other business structure is obliged to meet bona fide business expenses out of after-tax income.

My many right hon. and hon. Friends on both sides of the House—for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), for Rushcliffe, for Kingston and Surbiton, for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley)—have all criticised the crackpot climate change levy proposals. The crucial point is that the levy will tax energy, not carbon. The levy is not a necessary environmental tax, but simply an excuse for raising revenue.

The Budget's measures on transport expenditure are likely to prove inadequate, especially with the approval to introduce 44-tonne lorries, and particularly in the south-east.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells and my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) rightly criticised the tobacco duty increase, which will simply increase bootlegging. I commend to the House, in the recess, a read of Parson Woodforde's diary, which described an entirely similar phenomenon in the 18th century, when coffee was overtaxed and people's integrity was undermined by coffee smuggling.

More seriously, the tobacco duty increase bears hardest on the least fortunate members of society. I should perhaps declare an interest in the matter and in the Bill as a whole, both personally as a smoker and as a director of companies. Hon. Members will know that, although some people can buy cigarettes or wine abroad, single parents and many others who smoke and are at the bottom of society will suffer most from the increase.

Rarely has a Chancellor been in such a strong position to present his last Budget, or last Budget but one, before a general election. It is surprising that this Budget has been a relative flop. It has been criticised by business and by the International Monetary Fund. It has also been resented by ordinary citizens, who are now aware that their mortgage interest relief at source and married couples allowance are going as their new tax codes are being introduced. People are increasingly aware that they are paying £670 a year more in tax.

As the director general of the Confederation of British Industry commented:

> This is not the Budget for Business that we were hoping for.

The head of the Federation of Small Businesses commented:

> Overall this was a Social Budget and a lost opportunity for small business.

The Chancellor has sidelined over 80 per cent. of small firms by ignoring the unincorporated self-employed sector. I believe that the Budget reveals Labour's visceral response towards both the self-employed and pensioners. The Government think that, politically, neither of those groups is on their side, and, therefore, that neither of those groups is to be helped.

The real criticism—this is where my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells and I began—is that the Government have loaded taxes and regulations on the economy. Their regulations cost business £5 billion per annum and there will be £30 billion of extra taxation on business over the Parliament, as well as higher taxation on average families. But the Government have failed to deliver in the key service areas of health and education for which they were elected. That is why the House should refuse to give the Bill a Second Reading.

9.40 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): This has been an interesting debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friends the Members for North Durham (Mr. Radice) and for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and my hon. Friends the Members for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale), for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) and for Erewash (Liz Blackman) on their contributions, which I shall attempt to cover, as well as those of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the right hon. Members for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), and the hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) and for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie).

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley dealt effectively with the comments of the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) about Government spending on administration. My hon. Friend made it clear that administrative costs last year accounted for 4.1 per cent. of total Government spending, compared with 4.4 per cent. in 1996–97.

The purpose of the debate is to deal with the measures in the Bill. I shall try to respond to the concerns that have been expressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon talked about fairness in the tax system and the need to create a platform of economic efficiency and success on which to build social progress and stability. He highlighted the enterprise agenda in the Bill and echoed again that full employment is possible and we can deal with the structural unemployment that we inherited from the previous Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) made several points, some of which I shall return to. He will not be surprised to hear that I did not always agree with him. I shall deal in particular with his points about the smuggling of tobacco and alcohol. I remind him and the House that the Government have announced that we will spend another £209 million over three years and that there will be nearly 1,000 more staff tackling the issue. We are dealing with smuggling on three fronts: first, we are improving our intelligence collection and targeting those who finance smuggling; secondly, we are targeting those who transport the goods into this country; thirdly, we are targeting the gangs who distribute the products. My hon. Friend focused on duty, but the problem is far worse than that. The systematic criminal activity of smuggling goods into this country that do not carry the cost of duty means that whatever we do with our duty rates, we will still have to tackle the serious problems of smuggling. Hon. Members should not underestimate the problems of that systematic criminal activity.

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman before I move on to his points about climate change.

Mr. Tyrie: Does the Minister accept that the most intelligent thing to do is to accept that the Government are creating a criminal class through the huge differential? The answer is to reduce the differential and kill off the smuggling. The Government would probably get an increased yield in the long run as a result.

Dawn Primarolo: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman heard what I said, so I will repeat it. The problem is with goods on which no duty has been paid, smuggled in from beyond the European Union, at a price that we simply could not compete with, by systematic, organised criminals, not Jack-the-lads. The hon. Gentleman does the cause no good by continuing to peddle a simplistic answer to what is a very serious problem in all our communities.

Several hon. Members have spoken about the climate change levy. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) seems a little confused—I hope that he will not take that as patronising, as I would not dream of patronising him—about exactly what happens with the levy. The levy package will cut CO_2 omissions by at least 5 million tonnes by 2010. He said that it raised taxes, but in fact it is revenue neutral. All the proceeds will be recycled back to business. The package will be broadly neutral for the manufacturing sector, too. There will not be a transfer to the service sector, as some have suggested today.

The hon. Gentleman should say whether, in opposing the climate change levy, his party is opposing the employers national insurance contribution cut that will result from these measures.

Mr. Paterson: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No, because I want to answer the points made by others who have been in the Chamber for the whole evening.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs should be clear about what is in the Bill. He referred to the aggregates levy, as did others. They are wrong in thinking that it is in the Bill. It is a future consideration.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli talked about group relief, the European Court of Justice rulings and the changes in the Bill. There are two separate rulings: ICI-Colmer and another case, the name of which has just slipped my mind. The ECJ ruled, in relation to the single market, that double tax relief had to apply to branches. That means that it would be backdated for six years in the case referred to, because the ECJ has ruled that it would apply for the whole time.

[Dawn Primarolo]

I will look closely at what my right hon. Friend said. He also referred to profit and loss for branches. That was not covered in the ECJ ruling and would not be backdated for six years. That is a change that the Government have chosen to make.

Mr. Denzil Davies: My point—my hon. Friend has half answered it—was that it is possible to claim back for six years, but will the claiming back be restricted to residents within the European Union?

Dawn Primarolo: It applies not to residents but to companies. We are talking about branch relief. There is a difference, and my right hon. Friend spoke very particularly about the difference of residence and whether one must be in the European Union to qualify. The changes that we have made are part of the package of improvements that we are making in this year's Budget.

I want to speak about double taxation relief and the controlled foreign company measures to which several hon. Members have referred. Budget 2000 introduces changes to the corporate tax rules covering the treatment of foreign profits, including limiting the use of so-called mixer companies to shelter low-tax foreign profits from UK tax. Multinationals will no longer be able to use offshore structures to mix foreign tax rates of, say, 60 per cent. and 5 per cent. when they bring foreign profits into the UK as dividends. Currently, they do that to shelter low-taxed foreign profits from UK tax. That means that the Exchequer underwrites the cost to business of investing in countries that have not reduced their taxes to the UK level. Companies would not be able to get relief for higher foreign tax if they held overseas subsidiaries directly from the UK.

The reality is that companies have been attracted to the UK in recent years primarily as a result of the climate of economic stability that the Government have fostered through the low corporate tax rates and, most recently, by the abolition of advance corporation tax, which has made the UK a much more attractive location for companies that have activities outside the UK. The problem for international business and UK companies investing abroad is not the abolition of mixer companies, but that the tax rates in countries in which they are investing, including Germany, the US and Japan, are higher—

Mr. Flight: Will the Paymaster General give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No. The hon. Gentleman can sit down to allow me to make my points. He will have plenty of time to debate these points with me, in Committee and in the House again.

In some cases, the taxes are much higher, but changing the rules for mixer companies will get rid of the subsidy that the UK taxpayer provides for those other tax systems. The use of mixer companies has made UK investors more or less indifferent to the high tax rates in countries in which they invest, and we need to change that focus to ensure that we receive the correct amount of tax.

The fundamental point is that the Government do not believe that companies should be able to roll up profits offshore, in many cases out of the reach of any normal tax system. This is not about competitiveness, but about fairness. Opposition Members wish to focus only on that one issue. They do not wish to consider the wider issues of double taxation relief, but that is only one of the considerations that companies take into account when considering where to set up their groups. The changes to the double taxation relief need to be considered with the other elements of the tax and non-tax environment.

Other elements within the tax environment consist of taxation of capital gains made by companies on selling their subsidies and the tax relief for interest on loans to fund overseas investment. The changes made to the double taxation relief system may tighten the rules in that area, but when the proposals in the Budget are taken into account, the UK will remain competitive in the future in the international arena.

The background is simple. The relief for foreign tax extended to overseas companies mergers is part of the double taxation relief. Allowing foreign tax to be carried backwards and forwards for use in another year is also part of the double taxation relief. The Government are legislating for a number of practices to improve the transparency and certainty of the relief, as companies requested. The other changes, to which Opposition Members never wish to refer, make up the complete package, including the reduction in the corporation tax rates, the abolition of advance corporation tax, the extension of the group rules, and the abolition of stamp duty on sales of intellectual property to boost research and development to create an environment favourable to the innovation and invention of our companies. These provisions represent a broader rationalisation and modernisation of the double taxation reliefs, and Opposition Members should look at them carefully before making wild accusations about how much money is going to be saved. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs could not even tell the difference between £900 million and £900 billion—but I am not surprised at that.

I shall turn briefly to the question of what is known as IR35, which covers people using service companies. The House must be clear that we are not talking about entrepreneurs or employers. We are talking about employees who want a better deal from the tax system than their status says they are entitled to. Opposition Members must say why a nurse should pay more national insurance on her income than an IT specialist who uses a service company to reduce his income before making those payments.

Our intention is not to prohibit service companies—nor to touch those who work legitimately through them. We want to make it clear that people who are really employees but who seek to disguise their employment status through a service company should pay the correct amount of national insurance and tax. That is what every hon. Member in the Chamber does, and all the 26 million employed people in the tax system do.

Opposition Members continue to try and make it sound as if the people at whom the Bill is targeted are to be denied what other people get, but it is not possible for people simply to say, "I want to be self-employed." The rules on terms and conditions in the tax system dictate whether a person is categorised as self-employed or as an employee. Opposition Members argue for a 5 per cent. reduction in payments for training costs. The implication is that only employees in service companies are so entitled, and that ordinary employees are not.

There have been endless statements in support of the Government's action in bringing forward these proposals. There has been a vocal and effective campaign against them but, as *The Daily Telegraph* stated on 3 April:

> Many . . . people were merely taking advantage of a loophole in the tax rules. They were by most normal definitions employees but found a legitimate way of reducing their tax.

That is what IR35 seeks to deal with.

An article in *Scotland on Sunday* on 2 April stated:

> Every bar-room regularly knows at least one smart kid with a six figure income who has slashed his tax bills simply by calling himself self-employed and charging for his work through

a personal service company. Such practices cannot be allowed to continue.

As I said to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton, the Liberal Democrats advocate that everyone else's tax must go up by 1p in the pound; he must therefore explain why he believes that those few people who use service companies should be allowed to pay less tax than anyone else simply because that is what they want to do.

The Bill is about business and jobs, which will benefit from our commitment to enterprise. The Bill contains a number of measures to promote enterprise and help business—cuts in capital gains tax, research and development tax credit, the permanent 40 per cent. allowance for small and medium-sized companies, the new all-employee share ownership plan, the enterprise management incentive and the corporate venturing proposals.

The Bill promotes enterprise and fairness. It looks to the future, whereas the Conservative party is still locked in the past. Conservative Members have put forward no coherent proposals this evening: there is no indication that they have an understanding of what the problem is, let alone a glimmer of what the solution should be.

The Bill shows that this Government are keeping their promises where the previous Government broke theirs. Labour is standing for the many, as we deliver sound public finances, lower inflation, high living standards, help for poorer families and pensioners, and employment for opportunities for all, while the Conservative party continues to make reckless pledges that sacrifice future security. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 136, Noes 342.

Division No. 169] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Brinton, Mrs Helen
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*

Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on second or third reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills),

That Clauses Nos. 1, 12, 30, 31, 59, 102, and 113 be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

That the remainder of the Bill be committed to a Standing Committee.

That when the provisions of the Bill considered, respectively, by the Committee of the whole House and by the Standing Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill be proceeded with as if the Bill had been reported as a whole to the House from the Standing Committee.—*[Dawn Primarolo.]*

Question agreed to.

Committee tomorrow.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees),

White Paper on Food Safety

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 5761/00, a White Paper on Food Safety in the European Union; and supports the Government's view that consumer concerns and the complexity of current arrangements demand urgent action to develop a coherent EU policy for the foodstuffs sector: to this end, welcomes the establishment of a European Food Authority; and notes the Government's commitment to identifying the most appropriate terms and structure for such an Authority with the objective of improving and enhancing food safety and the associated EU regulatory process.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

The House divided: Ayes 305, Noes 170.

Division No. 170] **[10.19 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge Hl)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*

Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John

Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Police Firearms

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.31 pm

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): On 22 September 1999, Harry Stanley, one of my constituents, was walking home minding his own business, carrying with him in a blue plastic bag the leg of a coffee table which had just been repaired, when he was gunned down round the corner from where he lived. It was as swift and clinical as any contract killing, except that the killing was carried out not by professional criminals, but by two armed SO19 police officers. It ought not to happen like that—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. There is still far too much conversation in the Chamber. An hon. Member is addressing the House.

Mr. Sedgemore: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It ought not to happen like that—Harry Stanley trashed virtually on his own doorstep by the very people who are paid to keep the peace and to protect us. Undoubtedly, this was the worst and most tragic case of its kind ever to take place in the United Kingdom. For heaven's sake—Harry had been diagnosed as having cancer of the colon and was recovering from an operation.

Harry Stanley never asked for much. When he left home that morning, his last words to his wife Irene, who asked him what he wanted for dinner, were, "I'll have stovies"—a reference to a traditional Scottish dish of sausage, potatoes and onions. Hours later, Mrs. Stanley heard a noise—bang, bang—but had no idea that her husband was lying dead in a pool of blood around the corner.

When something like that happens and a wholly innocent person is killed, the system goes into denial. Inquiries are held, these days under the auspices of the Police Complaints Authority. The inquiry takes for ever, lasting three, four or even 10 times longer than a murder inquiry, often exceeding the 120-day deadline set. The papers are sent to the Crown Prosecution Service, where they are dealt with at a leisurely pace by the few Treasury counsel capable of handling them. Charges rarely ensue, and that is that.

My inquiries reveal that 22 people have been shot dead by police officers since 1990, some of them found to be unarmed and some armed with a toy replica gun. Prosecutions have been virtually non-existent. Indeed, in only two of the cases has anyone been charged. In one case, the jury acquitted; in another, a trial is pending. Although each case must be considered on its merits, when the cases are examined collectively, the signal that goes out to the public is that the police have a licence to kill.

In London the role of the police authority is performed by the Home Secretary, who is answerable to the House. The House, as far as I am aware, has not given the Home Secretary the power to grant police officers in London, openly or covertly, licences to kill.

Bizarrely, the identity of the killers in such cases is kept secret for as long as possible. Even today, Irene Stanley does not know who killed her husband. Why? If police

[Mr. Sedgemore]

officers had not been involved, she would have known a long time ago. Why has Mrs. Stanley received no word of apology from the two officers involved? Surely she has a right to know who killed her husband; surely her son Jason has a right to know who killed his dad. It was insensitive—to put it mildly—that the officers were not suspended pending an inquiry. That sends the wrong signals: namely that police officers have a licence to kill and that their identities will be protected.

Of course there are guidelines for the police on the use and issue of firearms. They are contained in an Association of Chief Police Officers document, which was issued in 1987, and which may have been reissued recently. The ACPO guidelines state that, first, firearms should be used only when there is reason to believe that a police officer may have to face a person who is armed or so dangerous that he could not be restrained without the use of firearms. Secondly, only reasonable force should be used. Thirdly, a proper briefing should be given to armed police officers before they set off. An officer of appropriate senior rank and, I presume, someone who has satisfied himself that an operation by armed police officers is justified should give the briefing. Fourthly, firearms should be used only as a last resort when conventional methods have been tried and failed. Fifthly, only properly trained police officers should bear arms.

I am told that the provisions of the ACPO manual are a Government secret, subject to a public interest immunity certificate. If that is true, the veil of secrecy should be lifted so that the public can know what the procedures are, and ascertain whether they are adequate and how they could be improved to avoid further death.

All the cases that I have examined raise the question of police training in the use of firearms. Too often, those who use guns seem deficient in detective skills and training. Surely it is important that officers who carry guns should be capable of detective work, which can shatter the preconceptions that they held when they set off on their mission, often in a highly charged and pumped up state. Uniformed police officers who carry and discharge guns must be capable of thinking quickly and intelligently for themselves as well as responding to the unexpected.

Harry Stanley's mistake when going home on that fatal day was to go into the Queen Alexandra pub for a glass of lemonade. When he left, some idiot from the pub telephoned the police and told them, without a shred of evidence, that the table leg in the plastic bag was a sawn-off shotgun. Sadly, the strength of that evidence was never tested in the recorded telephone conversation or by the police officers who subsequently shot Harry in the street.

One expects sensitivity from the police when innocent people have been killed through the use of firearms by their own. Even more sadly, the police failed to identify Harry as he lay dead in the street although he had a passport and other evidence from which he could easily have been identified.

Rule 7 of the coroner's rules 1984 requires the coroner to notify the relatives of a deceased person in advance of a post mortem examination so that, if they wish, a representative may be present. By the time the post mortem of Harry Stanley took place, Brian Craddock, the officer in charge of the inquiry, had discovered Harry's identity, but could not be bothered to inform Mrs. Stanley that her husband had been killed and that she had the right to a representative at the post mortem. We need more respect from the police than that: they should not feel that they can ignore us or our rights just because we are working class in Hackney.

At first, the Metropolitan police offered to pay for Harry's funeral—a small recompense, you might think, Mr. Deputy Speaker—but, in an act as nasty as any I can remember, the organisation that employed the killers who shot Harry withdrew the offer. Imagine what Mrs. Stanley's feelings must have been when she heard that. I can only suggest, in the strongest possible terms, that the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, John Stevens, pay Mrs. Stanley a visit to apologise in person for that appalling behaviour. What about a touch of common humanity from the commissioner?

Meanwhile, we still do not know why Harry Stanley died. The only ballistic expert capable of dealing with such cases, Chief Superintendent Alan Bailey, slowed the inquiry down by a month, developing questionable virtual reality reconstructions on video. I understand that that is some kind of new technique. The Surrey police are investigating the Metropolitan police. The Suffolk police are investigating the investigators, the Surrey police. It all seems a bit incestuous. It is not for me in the debate or for the House to pronounce on what happened in this dreadful case, but too much time has passed and there has been too much secrecy.

A daft suggestion was originally put around that, in walking home and minding his own business, Harry Stanley was on a suicide mission, hoping that police officers would turn up out of the blue and shoot him dead. Another silly suggestion was that he was Irish—so what else could he expect? From what I know of the case, my considered opinion as a barrister is that a jury should be asked to decide on the evidence whether the two police officers are innocent or guilty of manslaughter or, worse, murder.

10.42 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): As my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) has said, this is indeed an appalling case. I congratulate him on obtaining the debate. He was my Member of Parliament for a long period of my life, so it is a particular privilege to respond to his debate. I want to make a number of general points, but shall start with the specifics of the appalling incident that he described.

I express my sympathy and that of the Government to the family and friends of Harry Stanley over this sad death. That sympathy needs to be expressed not only for the reasons outlined by my hon. Friend in his eloquent address, but because any such terrible occasion must be properly acknowledged.

The shooting of Mr. Stanley occurred at about 7.54 pm on 22 September 1999 in Fremont street, Hackney—a street I know well. Following a call from a member of the public, police believed Harry Stanley to be armed. They challenged him. He raised a bag that the police believed to contain a firearm and the two officers each fired a shot. Mr. Stanley was fatally wounded and pronounced dead at the scene. It was subsequently discovered that he was not carrying any firearm.

The Metropolitan police reported the shooting to the Police Complaints Authority and it was agreed the next day—23 September—that the Surrey police should investigate the incident described by my hon. Friend. It remains under investigation by the PCA and we understand that that investigation is due to be completed shortly. However, as the matter has yet to be considered by the Crown Prosecution Service—my hon. Friend raised important issues about charges that might or might not be brought—and by the PCA in respect of any criminal or disciplinary matters, it is important that I do not say anything that might be held to prejudice those important decisions. I am grateful to him for acknowledging that.

I well understand the family's concern at the time taken by the investigation. The time that it takes to deal with complaints of this kind has been one of the most distressing aspects of this job, which I took on in August last year. Such investigations are time consuming and, in my opinion, very legalistic; moreover, they do not satisfy victims. I am talking not just about complaints of the type that we are discussing, but about all complaints about the way in which the police operate—particularly those involving death, of course, but others as well. We are actively considering the best way in which to deal with the problem. A report to be published shortly will, I hope, shorten the time taken by investigations. If an investigation takes time, however, it may mean that a thorough and rigorous inquiry has been undertaken, as is happening in this instance. Everything possible is being done to ensure that the truth is established.

I am glad that my hon. Friend dismissed some of the "silly suggestions"—I think that was the phrase he used—about what might or might not have been the motivation in this case. He did, however, raise a number of other matters, which the inquiry will decide. He asked what authority had been given. He also asked what briefing and instructions had been given, and correctly pointed out that there were clear guidelines. It will be for the inquiry to establish whether they were fulfilled. He raised the question of firearms being used as a last resort, which is a requirement of the guidelines. That, too, will be inquired into and reported on. More generally, he raised the question of proper training, which will be an important feature of the inquiry. He mentioned the failure to identify Mr. Stanley, and the extent to which the coroners rules were or were not obeyed. That, too, will be dealt with.

I am appalled by what my hon. Friend said about the withdrawal of the offer to pay for the funeral, and I will look into that specifically; but all the matters that he raised will be considered in the inquiry, and a full report will be made.

The use of firearms by police has been and remains a rare last resort. Neither in this case nor in any other have the police had a licence to kill; nor has the Home Secretary, any police authority or anyone else given them a licence to kill in any circumstances, general or particular. I feel I must rebut the suggestion that any police have a licence to kill, because it is simply wrong. The policy is that the police should not generally be armed, but that specialist firearms officers should be deployed when an operational need arises.

The protection of officers and members of the public is clearly the highest priority whenever there is a firearms risk. It is against that background that chief officers must decide whether, in any given circumstances, the deployment of armed officers is justified. I think there is a consensus that that is far preferable to the routine arming of patrol officers, which happens in some countries.

Decisions about the deployment of armed officers are the responsibility of individual chief police officers. They are, however, guided by a manual issued—as my hon. Friend said—by the Association of Chief Police Officers, which provides guidance on the selection of armed officers, training, tactics and equipment. It is intended to ensure that all matters concerning police firearms are subject to the tightest control and discipline, while aiming also to ensure that the police are properly equipped for the dangerous conditions that they must sometimes face. The report will deal with the extent to which those requirements were or were not fulfilled in the case of my hon. Friend's constituent.

As my hon. Friend said, the manual—which is currently being revised to take into account the Human Rights Act 1998—is confidential, because it is deemed to contain information that could be useful to armed criminals. However, I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that the police are actively considering whether parts of it, at least, could be made public. I agree with him that this is an important issue of public concern.

It may be of interest to the House to know how it is all moving: what the statistics are. Last Wednesday, we released figures to show that the number of firearms operations had fallen from 11,842 in 1997–98 to 10,942 in 1998–99, a decrease of more than 7 per cent. There has been a 4 per cent. decrease in the number of authorised firearms officers in police forces and a 3 per cent. increase in the number of operations involving armed response vehicles.

The number of authorised firearms officers continues to fall because of a trend towards concentrating police firearms capability in a smaller number of highly trained officers, and the replacement of many divisional firearms officers with a smaller number of armed response vehicle officers. The small rise in the number of operations involving armed response vehicles may have been due to more of those units being available to police. Many forces are increasing their numbers of armed response vehicles.

The number of operations in which firearms are discharged by police remains very low. The number of operations in which firearms are issued has decreased again. Chief officers are continuing to concentrate their firearms capacity in a small number of highly trained officers.

Obviously, any operation involving the use of firearms carries risks. If the operation goes wrong in any way, the consequences can be devastating for all those involved, but there will be an investigation process to be followed if incidents occur.

As my hon. Friend acknowledged, investigations are supervised by the Police Complaints Authority, which has the power to approve the choice of investigating officer and to give directions on the course of the inquiry. At the end of the investigation, the PCA must issue a statement indicating whether the investigation has been completed to its satisfaction.

I emphasise—it is a critical point, particularly in the light of the remarks about licence to kill—that police officers are not above the law. They need to abide by

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section 3 of the Criminal Law Act 1967, which is the golden rule on the use of force by officers of the law, or by anyone else. It says that

> a person may use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances in the prevention of crime, or in the effecting or assisting in the lawful arrest of offenders or suspected offenders or persons unlawfully at large.

That is the legal definition, which will be one of the aspects that is assessed in the inquiry to which my hon. Friend referred.

Of course, the degree of force justified will vary according to the circumstances of each case, but the responsibility for the use of the firearm is an individual decision which may have to be justified in legal proceedings. It is for the courts to decide in any particular case whether the force used was reasonable.

As part of the Home Secretary's action plan on recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the Home Office commissioned a feasibility study of possible arrangements for the independent investigation of police complaints. That report will be published shortly. The House may be interested to know that Liberty has also commissioned such a report, which will also be published. The Government will consider in the light of that work whether to introduce legislation to establish a new independent complaints investigation body.

I mention this because my hon. Friend, who spoke entirely reasonably, raised the doubts and concerns that individuals might have about the independence or otherwise of the complaints process. The Government believe that it is important that any complaints process on the operation of the police carry the confidence of those who have been affected by it. That is why we are looking very positively at the recommendation and have commissioned detailed work on how such an operation might work and provide reassurance, which is tremendously important for the future of policing as a whole.

I have endeavoured to explain the situation around the shooting of Mr. Stanley as I understand it and to extend, as strongly as I can, my sympathy and that of the Government to the family and friends of Harry Stanley. I have endeavoured to give some context to the overall situation and to indicate that many of the trends on the use of arms in those circumstances are going downwards at the moment. I hope that the result of the inquiry will be published shortly and that that will give everybody involved some purchase on the important issues at stake. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this subject and for airing what I think the whole House would agree is an important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 18 April 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS]*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 2 May.

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 2 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Referendums

1. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement on his powers in relation to the holding of referendums in Scotland. [118126]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I have no powers in relation to the holding of referendums in Scotland.

Mr. Swayne: The Scottish Parliament lacks the benefit of a second Chamber to keep it in touch with popular opinion on contentious and difficult matters. Will the Secretary of State take the powers in a short Bill to make greater use of referendums to make good that omission? Will he earn the lasting thanks of parents throughout Scotland, see off his rivals in the dismal Scottish Executive and perhaps bring some relief to nervous colleagues sitting behind him by announcing today that the first such referendum will be on section 28?

Dr. Reid: I know from previous exchanges that the hon. Gentleman does not fully understand the idea of devolution. I remind him that the point is to pass powers to other institutions, and not to decide to run those other institutions by decisions made here. Section 28 is a matter for the Scottish Executive. I am not sure that it is productive or useful for the hon. Gentleman to make his views known. The last time he did so, his views were so intolerably extreme that they distressed even the Scottish Conservative party, which takes a bit of doing. Having agreed, after several years of debate, to give devolution to the Scottish Parliament and the Executive, we should allow them to get on with it.

Mr. David Stewart (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): Does the Secretary of State share my view that referendums are useful gauges of political opinion? If he were to hold a referendum among the business community in my constituency, it would be overwhelmingly in favour of the retention of assisted area status. Would the Secretary of State agree to meet me urgently to discuss that issue?

Dr. Reid: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his ingenuity in managing to make a plea for Inverness. I am aware that he is a doughty fighter for the interests of his constituency and its business community. I would be glad to meet him to discuss these matters during the consultation period.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the great glories of our constitution is that nothing is irreversible? Will he keep an open mind on the possibility of arranging a further referendum in the future to give the people of Scotland the opportunity to say whether or not they regret their decision in the last referendum?

Dr. Reid: Our constitution has a number of great glories, one of which is the right hon. Member, who brings the House long hours and much amusement. Even the worst enemies of devolution would consider it a little premature to reverse in 10 months something it took 100 years to deliver.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): The Secretary of State will recollect that, before the last general election, the then Labour Opposition were keen on local referendums—such as the unofficial Strathclyde water referendum—to influence Government. In terms of the right hon. Gentleman's own reserved matters, does he think that he might have a referendum on whether the contracts for the ships at Govan should be commercial or military? That would allow an opportunity to nail the calumny put out by the Government that the commercial status is due to the last Government, as it is entirely the responsibility of his Government that that has come about.

Dr. Reid: Any opinion poll, representative sample or referendum held by an elected body is up to that elected body. The contracts for the ro-ro ferries were classified as commercial contracts under the advertisements put out in the *European Gazette* in January 1997, which even those with the urge to have collective amnesia about the last Government can remember was during the period of that Government. Rather than political point-scoring over Govan—particularly when the hon. Gentleman inevitably will score own goals, as he has just done—we would all be better served by concentrating our minds on the real issue, which is how we maintain a competitive and productive shipbuilding industry in this country, including at Govan.

Digital Transmission

2. **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): What steps he has taken to ensure that digital transmission is extended to the widest possible audience in Scotland before withdrawal of analogue transmission. [118127]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): We will ensure that all those who currently receive the main free-to-air channels on analogue television can receive these channels digitally before analogue transmission ceases. The BBC and the Independent Television Commission, which are jointly responsible for the terrestrial television network, are now considering, in consultation with digital broadcasters, Government and others, how to develop the coverage of digital television across the UK.

Miss Begg: My hon. Friend will be well aware that some parts of Scotland at present do not even receive terrestrial analogue television and that reception is very poor in other areas. Will he reassure me and the people who live in those areas that they will not be forgotten again and left out of the digital revolution?

Mr. Wilson: I am very pleased to give my hon. Friend that assurance. The objective must be to do better than is done at present in terms of coverage. The period of transition can be used to develop the technology, for instance using satellites, to take digital reception into the small pockets that do not at present receive terrestrial television. It is also important to make the point that digital is about more than television, because it will also be increasingly important in education and commerce. It would be a real disadvantage to any area if it did not have access to digital television, quite apart from the inability to receive television pictures. We must try very hard and we must not limit our ambitions to replicate what exists at present. We must do better and we must achieve our aims sooner than the planned period of transition.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Further to that reply, the Minister may be aware that some of my constituents can receive certain channels only from Northern Irish transmitters or from English transmitters, which may not be a problem during party political broadcasts but which certainly upsets people during football matches. Will he make representations to ensure that digital transmissions in Scotland come from Scottish transmitters?

Mr. Wilson: I remember the days when people travelled to places such as the hon. Gentleman's constituency to see football matches when they were denied to the rest of Scotland. The hon. Gentleman's point will be overtaken by technology, because digital will open up more choice. I hope that people in Scotland, and indeed in every part of the United Kingdom, will be able to see programmes that are generated from within Scotland as well as UK-generated programmes. In fact, that is the answer to dilemmas such as which version of "Newsnight" one wants to see. Perhaps I should get a plug in, and suggest that with digital it is possible—and some might say desirable—to see the UK version of the programme for all 45 minutes.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): While I welcome some of the reassurances on the technical side, can the Minister assure the House that those who have to access digital transmissions by satellite will not face additional cost barriers? The Minister mentioned the greater diversity of digital television. Will he ensure that in any switch to digital television lessons are learned from the takeover of Grampian Television about the importance of regional diversity in the future of broadcasting and in its regulation?

Mr. Wilson: Like many other people who are familiar with Grampian Television and who remember the great patriotic battle that was fought for the north and north-east of Scotland to keep a separate channel for those areas, I have looked with some cynicism and regret at what has been done since in terms of selling the Grampian franchise to the Scottish Media Group and the disappearance of much of the distinctive identity of Grampian, not to mention many of the jobs associated with Grampian in both English and Gaelic programming.

I certainly hope that the Independent Television Commission will be vigilant on behalf of those concerned in the north and north-east of Scotland. The spread of digital should be about greater choice, more programmes and more channels, and it must protect regional identity. I hope that digital transmission will give rise to a separate Gaelic channel—something that I know the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) will approve—and that is one way in which digital television will be able to enhance choice.

ONE Pilot

3. **Mr. Douglas Alexander** (Paisley, South): What assessment he has made of the operation of the ONE pilot project in Paisley; and if he will make a statement. [118128]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): Early impressions are that the Clyde Coast and Renfrew ONE pilot is an effective way of helping people into work.

Mr. Alexander: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the staff of the Employment Service and the Benefit Agency in Paisley and Johnstone are to be congratulated on that initiative? Would he concur with the view expressed by one of the personal advisers from the ONE initiative in Johnstone who told me last week that the initiative has been especially successful in assisting women returning to work in the area of the Clyde coast?

Dr. Reid: Yes, I am more than prepared to thank the staff my hon. Friend mentioned for the enormous amount of work that they have done. I know that he has given much encouragement to and taken great interest in the initiative.

The ONE scheme provides a one-stop shop for job seekers, providing practical help and advice on benefits, training, work experience, housing and child care. Claimants will have their own personal adviser to help them bring all that together and to assess their job potential. It is part of what we have been doing to assist people to find appropriate work where they want it, and it is one of the reasons why we have been able to create 60,000 new jobs in Scotland, and 800,000 in the United Kingdom as a whole. Employment in Scotland is running at about 2.3 million, the highest for something like 33 years.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the Secretary of State will acknowledge that we need this excellent new initiative because new deal has totally failed to help the long-term unemployed. Has the right hon. Gentleman seen the figures that show that the long-term unemployed are going through a revolving door? They are not—

Madam Speaker: Order. Do the figures refer to Paisley, which is the specific subject of the question? If the hon. Gentleman is referring to Paisley, the House would be grateful for the figures.

Mr. Bruce: The figures for Paisley show exactly that there is a very large revolving door in Paisley.

Madam Speaker: Would the Secretary of State like to answer on the Paisley issue, please?

Dr. Reid: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for your helpful ruling. It may help the hon. Gentleman if I explain to him that Paisley is a town quite near to, but distinct from, Glasgow. Such information is usually useful for Conservative Members.

The ONE scheme in Paisley is proving very successful. Youth unemployment and long-term unemployment have fallen there, and that represents what has happened across Scotland, where 77,000 people have gone through the new deal in various capacities. Youth unemployment in Scotland has been cut by up to 69 per cent. since this Government took office. Long-term unemployment has fallen by 20 per cent.

Pensioners

4. **Mr. Tony Worthington** (Clydebank and Milngavie): What calculation he has made of the impact of the Budget on pensioners in Scotland. [118129]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): Measures taken so far this Parliament mean that pensioner households will be on average £400 a year better off.

Mr. Worthington: I very much welcome all the measures that have been taken, which include free television licences for the over 75s, and the heating allowance. However, one of the major steps forward attracted the least comment. That was the proposal for a consultation paper on granting tax credits for those pensioners who have been left out so far—the ones who have worked all their lives and have small occupational pensions. Does my right hon. Friend welcome that move by the Chancellor, which ensures that those people who have served this country well will be taken care of in the future?

Dr. Reid: Yes, I welcome that very much. As my hon. Friend points out, the most recent Budget builds step by step on what we have done for pensioners. We have increased the fuel allowance and extended the capital allowance threshold beyond which pensioners with small savings lose benefit, but we have also pledged to look at the group of pensioners who fall into the category that my hon. Friend described. They are the ones who have a little but lose a lot because they are just above the minimum income threshold for the loss of benefits.

That group of people is very important to the Government. In allocating benefits to pensioners, we have tried to make sure that we have paid adequate attention to all pensioners. The poorest have the guaranteed minimum income, and the oldest have the free television licences, but now we want to help those who have a little but who lose a lot from the benefits system as it is constructed at present.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Will the Secretary of State explain how the proposed tax credit for pensioners will work?

Dr. Reid: That is precisely what we are discussing in the consultation process.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Glasgow contains many of the poorest constituencies in Scotland, but is he also aware that about 100,000 pensioners in the city will benefit to the tune of around £10 million from winter fuel payments alone? Will he consider that measure—and all the others introduced by this Labour Government to benefit pensioners—and contrast and compare it with all the hardship and misery caused to pensioner by the Tories when they were in power?

Dr. Reid: Yes, indeed. I am sure that I speak for all my colleagues when I say that senior citizens who have contributed so much to creating the wealth of this country should share in a reasonable proportion of that wealth in their old age. That is why the Government restored the free eye tests, which were so disgracefully abolished by the previous Government. It is why we introduced the guaranteed minimum pension for the poorest pensioners, the free television licence for the oldest ones, as well as providing a number of other benefits, including, of course, the £150 fuel allowance for every pensioner household every year. That is particularly beneficial, because giving that benefit in that form means that it is not taxed as it would be if it were paid out weekly. It also means that those in receipt of it are not penalised by losing benefits, as they might be in some cases if it was paid out weekly. That is another step in the Budget towards giving pensioners what they deserve and are due.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): What about the abolition of the age-related married couples allowance, which takes £500 off the income of people coming into pensionable age? How does that square with the Secretary of State's comments? Will he also comment on the fact that £2 billion has been taken from pension funds, thereby

driving a coach and horses through the promises that pensioners would be encouraged to save to supplement their state pension?

Dr. Reid: As I pointed out earlier, we have to consider all the measures that have been passed during this Parliament. I have not mentioned, for instance, the savings that pensioners will make because of the introduction of the new low 10p starting rate of income tax.

A range of other measures have been introduced, one of which the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. However, on balance, as a result of the measures taken in this Parliament pensioners are, per household, an average of £400 better off. I do not claim for a minute that that is enough; I do not claim that we have done everything that we could or would wish to do for pensioners. We have done a lot, but we are well aware that we have a lot more to do.

Step by step, under this Government, pensioners, including the poorest and oldest, will continue to become better off. That is why we are now looking at those just above the income threshold that loses them benefits—those who have a little but lose a lot. We will continue to make sure that pensioners get what they deserve under this Government.

Electronic Communications Bill

5. **Mrs. Rosemary McKenna** (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): What assessment he has made of the impact in Scotland of the Electronic Communications Bill. [118130]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): The Electronic Communications Bill will further improve opportunities for development of electronic business in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, to which the Government are heavily committed.

Mrs. McKenna: Can the Minister say what benefits are derived by Scotland from the joint ministerial meetings on the knowledge economy? Can he tell us who takes part in those meetings and, more importantly, whether they understand the importance of public access to information technology?

Mr. Wilson: The Government recognise that an enormously important part of the economy, now and in the coming decades, is based on the e-commerce revolution. It is extremely important that there should be no barriers to that; it is important that we should benefit from everything going on throughout the United Kingdom, and it is also important that we should add Scottish dimensions to what we do. The joint group is concerned to ensure that the UK legislation is enhanced and value is added within Scotland.

We are extremely aware of the access issue. In addition to e-commerce, the university for industry will be based on the use of such technology. So everything that we can do to remove obstacles, open up opportunities and make this a real business and career option for as many people as possible will create jobs in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): If the Bill is as good as it is cracked up to be, how does the hon. Gentleman explain that—as in England and Wales, so in Scotland—the Federation of Small Businesses has been deeply critical of the enormous regulatory burden that will be imposed by that legislation?

Mr. Wilson: When I see the hon. Gentleman, I think of the phrase "dot.com".

Mr. Bercow: Was that a joke?

Mr. Wilson: It was not a joke; it was to say simply that it is not unknown for the Federation of Small Businesses to be critical of legislation, whether Tory or Labour legislation. That is its job as a pressure group. Anything that allows electronic signatures to be admissible in court as evidence to prove authenticity of documents, smooths the way of e-commerce and adapts to current circumstances is good stuff when it comes to enhancing the technological revolution. Some small businesses will be in favour and others will have doubts. That has always been the way. We must communicate with them to persuade them why they should be in favour.

ADVOCATE–GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND

The Advocate–General was asked—

EU Directives

26. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): What recent requests she has received for her advice on devolved and reserved matters in relation to the European convention on human rights and European Union directives and regulations. [118151]

The Advocate–General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): Both these issues raise a number of interesting and difficult problems that have been brought to my attention and about which I have given advice.

Dr. Godman: There is a great deal of confusion about convention obligations and European Union law. Has my hon. and learned Friend any plans to provide guidance to Members, Members of the Scottish Parliament, peers and journalists on the extension of the convention, its application to Scots law and the differences between convention obligations and obligations under EU law?

The Advocate–General: I am always delighted to assist any Member from any party who wishes to discuss such matters with me. It is my job to advise the Government, and it would not really be appropriate for me to send out advise to other parties.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The hon. and learned Lady seems to operate in an extremely mysterious way. It is the one characteristic that she shares with the Almighty. She has been especially coy with the

House this afternoon, but as she has extended an invitation and as I am not a lawyer, may I see her and will she tell me what she really does do?

The Advocate–General: I would be delighted to give the hon. Gentleman a private appointment at any time to discuss these matters.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North–East Fife): Will the hon. and learned Lady tell the House whether she has considered the provisions of European Union law in regard to its effect on contract for roll on/roll off ferries on the Clyde? In particular, does she understand the distinction between the terms of an advertisement and the terms of a contract when it is ultimately placed? Has she considered whether it is possible to create a contract that will allow the ferries to be built in the United Kingdom, that will meet the UK's military aspirations and at the same time will not be contradictory of our commitments under EU law?

The Advocate–General: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is well aware that as a Law Officer I would not normally, and certainly not in this case, advise him of what advice I have given. I can say that I am aware in general terms of the types of distinction to which he refers.

Civil Service Pension Rights

27. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): What role she plays in relation to the proof of irregular marriages in the context of inherited civil service pension rights. [118152]

The Advocate–General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): The responsible Minister for civil service pensions is my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office. However, I am able to advise that in general terms the solicitor to the Advocate-General for Scotland's office advises all the United Kingdom Departments, and that would include that Department.

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that reply. I have provided notice of the Question as it relates to a constituent's case. Will she tell the House when my constituent, Mrs. Mavis MacDonald, can expect a reply to her request to inherit the pension rights of her deceased partner? Will it be before my correspondence file celebrates its second birthday?

The Advocate–General: I am well aware of the effort that my hon. Friend puts into constituency matters. I am much obliged to him for providing me with specific notice of the case to which he has referred. He will not wish me to discuss in public the details of the case, but I am more than happy to advise that documents are being considered and that the solicitors of my hon. Friend's constituent are being advised about the matter. If my hon. Friend wishes chapter and verse, I am more than happy to provide that to him in private.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Would the Advocate–General advise me whether the normal rules of common law marriages would apply in a case such as that raised by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne)? Would same-sex marriages be recognised for the purposes of inherited civil service pension rights?

The Advocate–General: The case referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) does not, so far as I am aware, raise any same-sex issues. The normal rules on cohabitation and repute are under consideration, which is part of the background to the difficulties experienced in my hon. Friend's case. The hon. Lady will know that the law in Scotland on marriage by cohabitation and repute is not always easy to interpret, and it may take some time before the proper documents are sorted out.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Gravesend Magistrates Court

31. **Mr. Chris Pond** (Gravesham): What representations he has received concerning the proposed closure of Gravesend magistrates court. [118157]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I have received 23 representations from Members, justices of the peace and other local interested parties, following Kent magistrates courts committee's determination to close Gravesend magistrates court.

Mr. Pond: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Virtually all the responses to consultation opposed closure of Gravesend magistrates court. Among those who responded, Kent police has estimated that it will face additional costs of around £30,000 a year, not including prisoner conveyance. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking Elizabeth Brice, the former chairwoman of Gravesham's magistrates bench, for her 32 years of service, following her decision to stand down as a result of the decision to close? Can my hon. Friend assure my constituents that she, unlike Kent magistrates courts committee, will give careful consideration to the views expressed by the local community?

Jane Kennedy: I am more than happy to associate myself with my hon. Friend's comments on the retirement of the former chairwoman of the Gravesham bench. Kent magistrates courts committee is responsible under statute for the efficient and effective running of the courts in its area. The Lord Chancellor's responsibility is limited to that of an appellate court in any dispute between the MCC and its paying authority over a proposed court closure. I shall pay careful attention to all the representations made during the appeal, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his vigorous representations, although it is too early to say how successful he has been.

Rural Magistrates Courts

32. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on the future of rural magistrates courts. [118158]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I gave him on 25 January 2000 at column 180W.

Mr. Paterson: Shropshire's courts have been placed in an area coterminous with West Mercia police authority's area leading to real fears that the six petty session divisions in Shropshire may go the way of those in Hereford, where there is now only one. Going to court is traumatic enough, especially for elderly witnesses, without having to face extra costs and the difficulties of travelling long distances. Will the Minister guarantee that the Government have no covert policy to close magistrates courts in rural areas?

Jane Kennedy: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. The Shropshire magistrates courts committee has no proposals for courthouse closures or for any internal reorganisation.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): To what extent have the changes been driven by public expenditure?

Jane Kennedy: Changes to the boundaries of MCCs are not cost driven, but are designed to meet the improved efficiencies that will arise from the coterminous nature of the new committees in relation to police authorities and the probation services.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Last week it was announced that nine magistrates courts would close in Devon and Cornwall, which will deny many people justice. Does the Minister agree that possible small savings in her Department, which are far outweighed by additional costs for other departments including the police, social services and the probation service, will not lead to efficiency and will not save public money? Does she agree that she should produce guidance for MCCs on these matters, and that that guidance should be made available to the public?

Jane Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman should draw breath for a moment and bear it in mind that any decisions on magistrates courts, their location and the services they provide are taken by local magistrates on magistrates courts committees, not by central Government. Such decisions are for local determination; any savings that might occur are for the local magistrates court committee to decide—as are the courts and their location. The central council of magistrates courts committees has produced a good practice guide for magistrates courts committees that are considering their accommodation. Both the Lord Chancellor's Department and Her Majesty's magistrates courts inspectorate endorse that guidance. There is no statutory duty to consult the public on, for example, proposed courthouse closures, but magistrates courts committees are encouraged to consult more widely than required by statute; in fact, they all do.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Is my hon. Friend absolutely sure that magistrates courts committees listen to the views of the grass roots? There is some doubt about that in north Wales. Is it right that the chairman of the magistrates courts committee in north Wales should also be the chairman of the North Wales police authority?

Jane Kennedy: Again, those issues are for local determination. It is important that the House bear in mind the fact that proposals by magistrates courts committees generally reflect the aim and expectation that services and facilities offered to all court users are brought up to the standard that we expect and require in the 21st century. Often, older courthouses lack facilities that are in keeping with modern standards.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister not recognise that, however disingenuously she reads out her ministerial brief, saying "It's nothing to do with us or the Government that courthouses are closing", local people in our constituencies want to keep their courts open? It would be far better and far closer to the interests of the people served by those courts for rural courts to stay open, even though their facilities might not be of the highest standard. Undoubtedly, all those closures are happening under her Government's guidelines, which, as we are all aware, are Treasury driven. Whatever she says, there is no way of hiding the real truth from those who are suffering from such court closures.

Jane Kennedy: Whether or not I was disingenuous is for the House to decide—the hon. Gentleman is as gracious as ever. However, most of the magistrates courts that have closed so far have been courts that magistrates courts committees no longer felt able to justify—either because the replacement of substandard facilities was needed or because they might have been satellite courts. For example, they might have been sited in local council chambers that severely lacked the necessary facilities.

I repeat that I shall always support changes that lead to the provision of a better and more efficient service for court users.

Family Mediation

33. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What steps have been taken to increase funding for mediation in family-related matters. [118159]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): The Government are committed to encouraging the greater use of family mediation. The provision of public funding for family mediation will be fully implemented throughout England and Wales by the latter part of this year. That will provide a significant source of income for many mediation services. In 1999-2000, approximately £5 million was spent by the Legal Services Commission on publicly funded mediation.

Mr. Thomas: Is my hon. Friend aware that magistrates courts in Middlesex—my area—have just withdrawn from

a scheme providing mediation in disputes with children? I understand that that is not an isolated example. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that she and her Department have a strategy to tackle that problem?

Jane Kennedy: I certainly hope to reassure the House on that point. Mediation services receive funding under the partnership arrangements that allow probation services to spend a proportion of their budgets in conjunction with voluntary organisations that are working to achieve similar objectives. The Middlesex probation service has reviewed its partnership funding arrangements to ensure that such funding is directed to those projects that contribute most to the service's objectives. Obviously, when those reviews take place, there are occasionally changes in the funding.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): When the law is clear that it is for the parties to a marriage to bear the responsibility for saving that marriage, and when no children are involved in a divorce, why should public money be used for a mediation service to retrieve what is, in essence, a private relationship between two individuals?

Jane Kennedy: The Government support the institution of marriage and believe that it is the best way for children to be raised. However, on the specifics of the question that the hon. Lady asks, very often mediation is funded through charities and we fund a national family mediation service through public funds. Local mediation services are not funded by central Government funding, but the fact that we fund the national service relieves the local services of some of those central costs.

Judges (Complaints)

34. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What criteria the Lord Chancellor adopts in choosing to investigate complaints from members of the public against judges. [118160]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The Lord Chancellor can investigate complaints about the personal conduct of judges. He cannot consider complaints about judicial decisions. As a general rule he will investigate any complaint that a member of the judiciary has behaved in a way that falls short of the standards that both he and the public expect. This can include allegations of inappropriate behaviour, conflict of interest or rudeness.

Dr. Cable: Is there not scope for a fully independent and transparent system of complaints to deal with cases such as that of my constituent Mr. Darbar, who spent several years in jail for a crime that he did not commit because of a mistake made by a judge—subsequently picked up in the Court of Appeal but for which no redress was possible. Another constituent, a Mrs. Hood, lost her pension because of a confusion over dates on the part of a judge in an industrial tribunal—again, with no redress forthcoming. If doctors can be struck off following complaints, why cannot judges be subject to the same discipline?

Mr. Lock: I hear what the hon. Member says. The Lord Chancellor does consider complaints against judges extremely seriously, but it is important to keep this matter in perspective. Last year, there were about 412 complaints relating to the personal conduct of judges, arising from approximately 250,000 sitting days, so the allegation that judges routinely make mistakes must be seen in the context that most of our judges are extremely hard-working, dedicated and professional servants of the public.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Although I accept the Minister's comments, does he not accept that if there were truly independent evaluation and monitoring of judges, it would lead to greater transparency and far greater public confidence? When I raised the subject with my hon. Friend previously and suggested that he introduce Ofjudge, he said that was a novel idea. May I suggest to him that all good ideas start off by being novel? Will he reconsider?

Mr. Lock: I am always willing to listen to my hon. Friend's interesting, and perhaps novel, suggestions, but the independence of the judiciary from the Executive is a fundamental principle of our constitution and should be upheld, and any suggestion that the Executive should have a role in monitoring what judges do and the way that they do it would have to be very carefully considered to ensure that it did not infringe that very important principle of judicial independence.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): There is a suspicion among my constituents that the inflexibility of judges' working hours leads to the postponement of an unnecessary number of cases to another day, involving increased numbers of witnesses having to travel extra days to attend court. Has the spokesman of the Lord Chancellor had any complaints in that respect? If not, will he examine that problem?

Mr. Lock: I am always willing to accept complaints concerning specific instances where such a postponement has happened. The Lord Chancellor has made it entirely clear that the courts, like other public bodies, are there to serve the interests of the consumer, not to support the institution or to work in a way that is convenient for the professionals working in the system. It is essential that the consumers—the parties to the dispute and, very importantly, the witnesses—have the services that they are entitled to expect.

I invite the hon. Gentleman to write to me or my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor if he knows of any specific instances concerning unnecessary adjournments. I will ensure that they are properly investigated.

Community Legal Service

35. **Mr. Eric Martlew** (Carlisle): What steps have been taken at a local level to distribute information on the community legal service in England and Wales. [118161]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The Lord Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy) and I have attended local launches and seminars across the country to promote the community legal service and we have issued two CLS newsletters.

After the local elections in May, cards giving information about the CLS will be delivered to every household in a partnership area in England and Wales. That will be supported by advertising campaigns in the local media.

Mr. Martlew: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply, and I also thank him for recently visiting my constituency to talk and to see the actions of Cumbria county council. I understand that it was a very worthwhile visit, especially the video conference with the rural areas. Is my hon. Friend sure that his Department is making the best use of information technology to get the message of this new service across to the public?

Mr. Lock: I am very pleased that my hon. Friend asked that question. Since I went to Cumbria and saw the impressive work undertaken by the community legal service partnership there, including the innovative use of information technology, my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has also launched a community legal service, including the legal information advice website known as "Just Ask". This will provide valuable legal information and advice online to millions of people. I am pleased to be able to tell my hon. Friend that over 70,000 people have visited the website so far.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Westminster Hall

45. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If she will make a statement on the cost to date of the Westminster Hall experiment. [118171]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): It is not possible to give a precise estimate of the cost of Westminster Hall itself, because it is housed in a refurbished Grand Committee Room, and that refurbishment would have been done in any event. Similarly, some £71,000 was spent on professional fees, and that would have been incurred in any refurbishment. But my understanding is that expenditure of some £30,000 was incurred in furnishing the Grand Committee Room additionally for the experiment, and that the running costs are some £13,000 a month.

Mr. Paterson: I think that that is a waste of money. I have attended debates in Westminster Hall which have been so poorly attended that there has been no atmosphere whatever, mainly because of the format. My main memories are of tourists in buses passing behind the Minister's head and bemused schoolchildren going out of the squeaky door. Could we not return to the familiar, traditional format of Committee Room 14, which would house all the Members who wished to attend the debates, a format that works and encourages rigorous debate?

Mrs. Beckett: The "traditional format" of Committee Room 14 has been used for a great many Committees. This is a separate feature. I remind the hon. Gentleman that we have found the opportunity for some 200 extra debates over a year as a result of the Westminster Hall operations. If the hon. Gentleman wants to say that value for money should be judged in terms of using time in debate, or indeed the number of hon. Members who attend, he is setting rather a dangerous precedent.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not very unfortunate that Conservative Members seem very widely to feel that the Westminster Hall experiment is a waste of time? Surely, as my right hon. Friend said, it cannot be judged by the money costs? Surely the important thing to judge it by is the way it gives many hon. Members on both sides of the House the opportunity to take part in debates on a far better basis than if we were simply to restrict debates to this Chamber.

Mrs. Beckett: I have noticed that since the Westminster Hall experiment commenced we now have the opportunity to debate about four times as many Select Committee reports as in the past, which in theory is supposed to be to the advantage of the Opposition. Moreover, because our capacity to hold Adjournment debates has increased, the demand for such debates has doubled. Indeed, many Opposition Members, including some who did not vote for the Westminster Hall experiment, make use of it in that way.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I endorse the last comment of the President of the Council? I have attended a number of debates in Westminster Hall—including debates initiated by Conservative Members—which have been excellent. May I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to the original recommendations of the Modernisation Committee in relation particularly to value for money in what we are doing in Westminster Hall, and remind her that the Law Commission said that it was desperate to have more opportunities for non-controversial legislation, tidying-up legislation, to be taken in a forum that would allow debate where a Division was not required? Has the right hon. Lady had any discussion with colleagues or with the other parties to see whether we could use this badly needed improvement to take some of our legislation in Westminster Hall?

Mrs. Beckett: I have not done so since the experiment began, although I am willing to do it as we review its working. One reason for not having done so is that, as the hon. Gentleman may recall, anxiety was expressed in some parts of the House—perfectly reasonably, I thought—that the Westminster Hall experiment would simply be another way for the Government to get through more legislation. So I gave an absolute assurance that the Government would not seek to use Westminster Hall as such a forum, certainly not during the experimental period. Obviously, we would look at that again only if the House so desired.

I accept, however, that the experiment drew on experience in Australia that provides for some uncontroversial legislation to be discussed in such a forum. Perhaps, over time, the House may want that to happen here, because we are talking not about legislation for which the Government might in some other way find time, but about legislation for which the Government—to put it frankly—never find time. I add a caveat, however. Sadly, what the Law Commission thinks is uncontroversial is not always uncontroversial to everyone else.

Draft Bills

46. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): If she will make a statement on the number of bills produced in draft in *(a)* the 1997–98 session and *(b)* each subsequent session to date. [118172]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Three draft Bills or parts of Bills were produced in Session 1997-98, six in Session 1998-99, but none so far this Session. Some Departments have, however, consulted informally on Bills in preparation and some draft Bills are expected shortly.

Mr. Healey: I welcome my hon. Friend's declaration that more draft Bills are on the way. Does he recognise that the modernisation of our procedure is strongly backed by many inside and outside the House? Does he also agree that greater use of pre-legislative scrutiny gives greater scope for further modernisation of House procedures, including, perhaps, carrying over legislation, timetabling Bills and even introducing the concept of a voting hour?

Mr. Tipping: My hon. Friend makes several important points. First, draft Bills have been welcomed widely across a number of communities. Secondly, Bills have been improved substantially by pre-legislative scrutiny. Finally, he is right that pre-legislative scrutiny is part of a wider package of measures on which we need to make more progress.

Sir George Young (North–West Hampshire): The Opposition very much welcome the publication of Bills in draft. However, is it not unwise to assume that, just because a Bill has been first published in draft, it will then take less time to pass through the House of Commons and the upper House; and does not the fate of the Financial Services and Markets Bill and the Freedom of Information Bill disprove that assumption? To avoid over-programming the House's time with Government Bills, will the Government be more realistic about the time required by Bills that were first considered in draft when they come before the House?

Mr. Tipping: Clearly, Bills can be improved by pre-legislative scrutiny. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Freedom of Information Bill. Again, that was improved in draft, but there were major policy differences that could not be resolved. He also mentioned the Financial Services and Markets Bill. Of course, during its long preparation, the market itself changed; the stock market was demutualised and that had implications for the Bill. However, he is right to say that it would not be wise to assume that, just because a Bill is published in draft, it will have an easier passage. The converse may be true, because people have more time to think about it. Whatever body is asked to scrutinise a draft Bill must have time to do that. It involves a difficult balancing act, because programmed Bills will always need to take priority.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Appointments Commission

47. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What progress she has made in identifying candidates suitable for appointment as chairman of the Appointments Commission. [118173]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Although my right hon. Friend is not responsible for appointing the Appointments Commission, I understand that the appointments process is making good progress. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister hopes to be in a position to make an announcement shortly.

Mr. Prentice: So am I right in thinking that the Prime Minister appoints the chair of the Appointments Commission which, in turn, appoints Members to the upper Chamber? Is that not a bizarre state of affairs, and is not appointment very much second best to election? As we move towards the next general election, we need the Labour party and the Labour Government to nail their colours to the mast and to argue vigorously for a small, directly elected second Chamber rather than the ridiculous melange that we have been invited to accept at the moment.

Mr. Tipping: I do not think that my hon. Friend is right. He will have an opportunity to discuss those matters when we debate the Wakeham commission on, I believe, 4 May. The Appointments Commission will have seven members, three of whom will be appointed by the main political parties. The present Prime Minister is the first Prime Minister to lose—or reduce—his powers of patronage as a result of a decision by the Appointments Commission. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Opposition Members may scoff, but the Conservative party remains the major, dominant party in the House of Lords.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I associate myself entirely with the remarks of the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), and draw the Parliamentary Secretary's attention to more modest appointments. When the commission or the Privy Council makes an appointment, will the person responsible for doing that be entirely dependent on the clerk of the Privy Council trawling the relevant Departments, or will he put in a mechanism encouraging other institutions and voluntary bodies to submit the names of those whom they believe suitable for appointment?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman makes important points and I look forward to his contribution in the debate on the Wakeham report on 4 May. The Government intend that appointments should be made from a wider range and different groups of people. One of the Appointments Commission's tasks will be to ensure that a wider choice of names is available. The Government have made substantial progress on the number of people from the black and ethnic communities, as well as the number of women, who have been appointed.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): How on earth can the Parliamentary Secretary say that the Prime Minister is self-effacing and abdicating when the right hon. Gentleman is the very fount and geyser of honours? When will the chairman of the Appointments Commission be appointed? The Prime Minister promised that the appointment would be made before Easter. Are we to take that to mean this week, before Orthodox Easter or next Easter? When will it happen?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman should not bluster so much. I accept that he is recovering from ill health, but he should listen to my answer, which is that the appointment will be made very soon.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): There is a difference between a commission that appoints cross-party or independent peers, and the new development that the Parliamentary Secretary appears to be introducing by saying that the commission should make political appointments. Does he intend that the Prime Minister should give the commission that power?

Mr. Tipping: I am sorry about that confusion. The Appointments Commission will look for, trawl and appoint Cross-Bench peers from many different groups. Party leaders will still submit their chosen names to the Appointments Commission, which will then make decisions about them.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Modernisation

48. **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): If she will propose that the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons review the recommendations in its sixth report (1997–98, HC 779) on current voting methods. [118174]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The Modernisation Committee is currently reviewing that matter.

Mrs. Campbell: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. Does she agree that it would be helpful if the Modernisation Committee came up with a single recommendation for electronic voting that would allow right hon. and hon. Members to mingle in the voting Lobby and reduce the time spent on multiple votes?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. However, I am not in a position to respond because the Committee has not yet reconsidered whether there is any possibility of a single recommendation emerging. I certainly share my hon. Friend's view that a multiplicity of recommendations is less likely to lead to a clear decision.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): When looking at new forms of voting, will the Leader of the House make absolutely certain that, whatever system is recommended, it ensures that Ministers come to vote regularly? From the voting lists, it appears that people such as the Prime Minister hardly ever come to the Chamber and cannot be lobbied by their own Members, let alone those belonging to other parties.

Mrs. Beckett: Of course, I cannot prejudge the Committee's views. However, I certainly believe it important to have a focus in the parliamentary day, during a vote, so that Ministers can attend and Members can mingle. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House recognise the value of that.

I have lost count of the times when I have reminded Opposition Members that, contrary to what they say, the Prime Minister attends more Prime Minister's questions, takes more questions, and is in this House more often than any of his predecessors. It is a pity that it is so hard to get the facts into their heads.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Privy Council Judicial Committee

49. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): What recent representations she has received calling for reform of the judicial function of the Privy Council; and if she will make a statement. [118175]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Apart from questions from the hon. Gentleman, no representations about the Judicial Committee have been received.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am pleased to be the first. Will the Minister reflect on the fact that we host, largely fund and appoint members of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, who can and still do preside over matters of life and death, and who have given the green light to executions in other jurisdictions around the world? That contravenes our obligations under the European convention on human rights. If the Minister says, "Ah, but they are dealing only with matters of law", I remind him that the House has decided that capital punishment is both unlawful and repugnant. It cannot therefore be right that we continue to host, appoint and fund the Judicial Committee under the present arrangements. Will the Minister reconsider the matter?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman described himself as first—for a moment, I thought that he would say "unique". He has his own style. He has asked questions about the matter, and he well knows the answer. The Judicial Committee acts on behalf of other states. It is up to the other states to decide whether they want to change the way in which they deal with these matters.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Last Thursday, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in answer to my oral question about the Government's recent package of help for pig farmers, told the House:

> The package has three elements. They have been published, and I understand, too, that the hon. Gentleman's written questions have been answered.—[*Official Report*, 13 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 495.]

My written question, which was tabled 10 days before the Minister's claim, had not, at that time, been answered. It was finally answered yesterday, at column 332W. The answer stated that information about three elements of the Government's package for pig farmers—eligible recipients, conditions of eligibility and time of availability—remains to be announced at an unspecified future date.

The only way to describe accurately the Minister's answer on the Floor last Thursday would involve using an unparliamentary term. Do you share my concern, Madam Speaker, that Ministers tell the House that parliamentary questions have been answered when they have not been answered and that information about Government policy, on which the survival of thousands of small businesses depends, has been published when it has not been published?

Madam Speaker: Some of the points raised by the hon. Gentleman are not points of order; they are a matter for argument. He has put his thoughts on the official record.

May I say in general reply to the hon. Gentleman that some weeks ago, hon. Members asked me to look into the fact that questions were not answered on a named day, and that there was a great deal of slippage there? Hon. Members also asked me to look into the long delays in correspondence from ministers.

I can tell the House that I have done precisely that. In recent times, I have had a long discussion with the head of the civil service, the Cabinet Secretary, on those issues, and only recently, I had a meeting with the Minister for the Cabinet Office, along with her staff. Both those people are extremely sensitive to the needs of the House. I am totally convinced that they are doing everything possible to try and bring about improvements. The House can be certain that I shall continue to use my best endeavours and to monitor the situation.

I ask hon. Members to be a little tolerant on the issue, as I hope that the improved procedures that have been proposed to me will be allowed to work through, and that we shall see a better service, which the House certainly has a right to expect.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sure that hon. Members in all parts of the House will welcome your statement and the initiative that you have taken. In your discussions, was any reference made to a habit that seems also to be growing: the tendency to delay a reply from a ministerial source until some executive agency can be found to pass the buck to? As a result, hon. Members do not get a direct answer on the Floor of the House at all.

Madam Speaker: I had very long meetings—more than two hours—with the head of the civil service. I hope that all these matters will be looked into. I cannot go into details at this stage, but I want the House to be serviced properly by Whitehall, and that is what I am seeking to achieve.

Corporate Homicide

3.34 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to create a new offence of corporate killing to replace the offence of manslaughter in certain cases where death is caused without the intention of causing death or serious injury.

My Bill has three purposes. The first is to create a new criminal offence of corporate killing. When the conduct of a company's management falls far below what can reasonably be expected, and is the cause or one of the causes of a person's death, that company must answer to the criminal courts. Secondly, if a company is convicted of corporate killing, the court should not only be able to punish the company severely, but have the power to order the company to put right the failings that were the cause of the death. Thirdly, the Bill would impose on the senior management of a company—its chairman and managing director—an overarching responsibility for the health and safety of its work force, and, equally important, for the health and safety of the general public.

Before becoming a Member of Parliament I practised as a personal injury lawyer, representing many families who had been bereaved by avoidable accidents. Most of those fatalities involved individuals—employees, motorists, pedestrians—and went unremarked in the press; but the feelings of loss and the sense of injustice suffered by the victims' families were just the same as those whom I helped who had lost loved ones in major incidents such as the Zeebrugge ferry disaster and the King's Cross fire.

Three days after that terrible tragedy at King's Cross, during my investigations on behalf of the bereaved and injured, I inspected what was left of the tube station. Nothing that I had previously experienced could have prepared me for the sights and smells of the fire's devastation. As I took statements from victims, distraught relatives, firefighters and tube staff, and as I sat through the public inquiry day after day hearing over and over again about the failures of the senior management of London Underground Ltd., it struck me as outrageous that neither the company nor any of its managers would face criminal proceedings over those 31 deaths. That was because of the inadequacies of the criminal law.

During his inquiry into the 192 deaths on the Herald of Free Enterprise, Mr. Justice Sheen said:

All concerned in management, from the members of the board of directors down . . . are guilty of fault. From top to bottom the body corporate was infected with the disease of sloppiness . . . The failure on the part of . . . management to give proper and clear directions was a contributory cause of the disaster.

However, the prosecution in the Zeebrugge case also collapsed owing to those same inadequacies of the criminal law—inadequacies highlighted by the more recent railway disasters: inadequacies that the Bill would rectify.

It is not just the headline-grabbing fires and rail crashes that concern me. In the last 10 years, more than 3,000 people have been killed at work, and hundreds of members of the public have met their deaths owing to corporate neglect. Only two companies have ever been successfully prosecuted for manslaughter. OLL Ltd. was convicted over the canoeing accident that killed four teenagers in Lyme Regis bay when they were swept out to sea with inadequate clothing and equipment. The second case involved Jackson Transport, whose young employee, wearing only a boiler suit and with no other protective equipment, was drenched in a deadly chemical.

Those two convictions expose the absurdity of the law of corporate manslaughter as it currently stands. Corporate guilt rests entirely on proof of the individual guilt of a senior company officer. However reckless or grossly negligent the company as a whole may have been, it will escape conviction if no individual person—no "controlling mind" of the company—can be found guilty of manslaughter. The law is thus biased against small "one-man band" companies, in which it is easier to identify the individual manager or director who is to blame. Large companies escape because the accident is due not to the failure of an individual, but to the collective failure of the company's management systems. The bigger the company, the less chance there is of a successful prosecution.

I believe that only imposing duties on the most senior officers of a company will ensure that safety is given the same priority as profit. Safety awareness, and the great responsibility that it entails, should lie with those at the top—the chairman and managing director—and not with the employees, such as train drivers or ships' crews, who are always put up as the fall guys.

In 1996 the Law Commission recommended proposals for reform, including those advocated in the Bill. On 1 February this year, in its report on the work of the Health and Safety Executive, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs recommended

that the government brings forward legislation to introduce a crime of corporate killing as soon as possible.

I know from answers that I have received to parliamentary questions that the Government have been considering the matter. After I gave notice of my Bill, I was pleased to read in *The Sunday Telegraph* this week that the Government expect to publish their proposals for consultation in the next few weeks.

The Bill would put the directors of companies that kill in the dock to answer for their actions and failings. If convicted, they would face not only the full rigours of the law, but the equally important power of the court to order them to put matters right for the future.

The Bill's purpose is not to bash responsible companies but to promote safety. Many companies do a good job, and look after their employees and the public properly. However, some do not, and they use loopholes in the law to escape their just desserts.

If we are to prevent further tragedies such as the Hillsborough disaster, the Clapham, Southall or Paddington train crashes and the Bradford City, King's Cross or Piper Alpha fires, tough new laws must be introduced. The Bill provides for that. Public confidence in industry and in the enforcement authorities suffers when the perpetrators of serious accidents escape prosecution on a legal technicality instead of having their culpability tested in court according to the standards that apply to a private individual on a charge of manslaughter. The Bill provides for that test, and I hope that the Government will accept it. The public expect nothing less from the Government, and I am sure that they will deliver.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Dismore, Mr. Martin Salter, Ms Karen Buck, Mr. Michael Clapham, Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody, Mr. Gordon Prentice, Mr. Andrew Miller, Mr. Lawrie Quinn, Ms Claire Ward, Mr. Iain Coleman, Mr. Stephen Pound and Siobhain McDonagh.

Corporate Homicide

Mr. Andrew Dismore accordingly presented a Bill to create a new offence of corporate killing to replace the offence of manslaughter in certain cases where death is caused without the intention of causing death or serious injury: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 5 May, and to be printed [Bill 114].

Orders of the Day

Postal Services Bill [*Money*] (No. 2)

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Postal Services Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred in consequence of the Act by the body to be known as the Postal Services Commission.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

3.43 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South–West Hertfordshire): I am apprehensive about the money resolution. The Financial Secretary is busy today: he must tackle not only the money resolution to the Postal Services Bill, but also that to the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. We can be justifiably apprehensive about granting permission for a blank cheque. In Committee, we spent a long time trying to determine the cost of the commission. We tried to glean from the Minister whether there would be some limit on the number of members. We later discovered that they would be paid £10,000 each for their work during the year. However, amendments to resist that amount of expenditure were blocked, and the Government used their majority to allow an open-ended position.

The Government stressed the figure of £400 million which would be saved through automated credit transfer, thus causing anxiety to sub-post offices. The Government were enthusiastic about that and did not wait for the report of the performance and innovation unit on what could be put in its place and the sort of revenue that would be available to mitigate the loss.

We shall debate new clause 1 later. We welcome it as far as it goes. We have no idea whether the commission will be part of the delivery mechanism that will follow from it. If that is the case, what sums will be involved—£20 million, £30 million or £100 million?

The Financial Secretary has glibly and easily slid in the money resolution, which is, in effect, a blank cheque, as hon. Members will see if they care to examine it. I ask the Minister to consider whether he can impose some limits on it. We want to know whether the commission will be the vehicle to fund new clause 1.

The Government's record on controlling the expenditure of new bodies is not good. I have only to remind the House of what has happened to the budget of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets: it was intended to be £29.8 million, but it is now estimated that it will rocket to £64.5 million. An increase of more than 100 per cent. in one year is predicted. Given that we have a blank cheque and we do not even know the commission's estimated cost, I confess that I am exceedingly apprehensive. The Minister must put more flesh on the bones before the House will be prepared to sign the blank cheque.

3.46 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): We are slightly apprehensive about the money resolution, so, before the Bill completes its remaining stages in the House, the Minister should explain the unusual step of introducing it now. Money resolutions are nothing new,

[Mr. Patrick McLoughlin]

but they are usually dealt with on Second Reading. As a result of changes in the previous Parliament, money resolutions are not debatable if dealt with on Second Reading—they merely go through on the nod—so the Minister should explain why the Government have used this unusual procedure.

If, as my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) said, that procedure has been used solely because of new clause 1, the Minister should explain, and possibly apologise for, the way in which the Secretary of State misled the House on Second Reading. He gave an assurance that the subject of new clause 1—which is the reason why the money resolution has been tabled—would be introduced in time to be dealt with in Committee.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): Wrong again.

Mr. McLoughlin: As *Hansard* reported, the Secretary of State said that amendments would be tabled in Committee. From a sedentary position, he says that I am wrong, but he should read his own words, as I did last week.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman is wrong because the reason for tabling the money resolution has nothing to do with the subsidy provision that we intend to introduce under new clause 1.

Mr. McLoughlin: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that clarification, but he does not disagree that, on Second Reading, he said that the subject of new clause 1 would be dealt with in Committee. He says that the money resolution has nothing to do with new clause 1, but it is wide-ranging and covers "any expenditure" arising from the Bill. Supplementary money resolutions are often proposed if the Government come up with new ideas. Perhaps he is telling us that the proposals in new clause 1 are not new. The Government should explain why they have introduced the money resolution just before we complete the Bill's remaining stages and why it was not introduced on Second Reading.

3.49 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Although I sat through the whole of the Committee stage on the Bill, I cannot recall the Minister explaining that there would be a need for a money resolution. It is curious that we had no mention of the new money resolution in Committee if there was a need for one on Second Reading.

The Secretary of State said that my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) was wrong to assume that the fact that new clause 1 has within it a subsidy is the reason for the money resolution, but the procedure this afternoon is curious. Many of us will listen with interest to what the Minister has to say in justifying the money resolution at this time. One can assume only that he has been advised by lawyers that, if new clause 1 becomes part of the Bill, he will require a money resolution.

Clearly, we will discuss new clause 1 shortly, but I am surprised. Perhaps the Minister will tell me if I have it wrong, but, so far as I can recollect, at no time in Committee did we ever discuss the need for a money resolution. Indeed, at no stage did the Minister give the Committee any indication of the sums of money that it would be necessary to find from the public purse, and, hence, of the need now for a money resolution.

3.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under–Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): First, I did say in Committee that there would be a need for a money resolution. The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) attended very—

Mr. Baldry: Assiduously.

Mr. Johnson: Assiduously, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not there on that particular occasion. However, as the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) will verify, I did say that there would be a need for a money resolution on Report.

The second money resolution is necessary to ensure that it is within the scope of the Bill to make provision for payment out of money provided by Parliament of expenditure incurred by the Postal Services Commission. As we explained in Committee, it is a new initiative in postal services. It is also the first time that we have had a regulator that consists not of one person, but of a committee. I think that, following a review of utility regulation some time ago, there was all-party support for that.

It is impossible to judge exactly how much money the commission will need, but its cost will be paid by the operators in the universal service area, which means that the Post Office will meet the full cost of that. Therefore, the cost that will be incurred as a result of the Bill will not be materially affected. Rather, it affects the financial systems and procedures.

The Government's intention is that the commission will be a non-ministerial Government Department with its own vote, putting it on a similar footing to the utility regulators in that respect. We will discuss an amendment on similar funding for the revamped consumer body. Technical amendments have been tabled for consideration on Report to effect that change.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in an intervention, the necessary authorisation on the subsidy clause was provided under the first money resolution, taken after Second Reading on 15 February. That, among other matters, authorised the payment of any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown or Government Department in consequence of any Act resulting from the Bill. Any scheme under that clause as drafted will require the approval of Parliament, so I urge the House to accept the second money resolution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Postal Services Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred in consequence of the Act by the body to be known as the Postal Services Commission.

Postal Services Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 1

SUBSIDY FOR PUBLIC POST OFFICES

'.—(1) The Secretary of State may by order make a scheme for the making of payments for the purpose of—

(a) assisting in the provision of public post offices or public post offices of a particular description, or

(b) assisting in the provision of services to be provided from public post offices or public post offices of a particular description.

(2) A scheme under this section which provides for the making of payments for a purpose falling within subsection (1)(b) shall ensure that no such payments may be made unless the person deciding whether to make the payments considers that the provision of the services concerned from public post offices or public post offices of a particular description would assist in the provision of public post offices or (as the case may be) public post offices of that description.

(3) Payments under a scheme under this section shall be made by the Secretary of State or by another person out of money provided by the Secretary of State.

(4) A scheme under this section shall specify—

(a) the descriptions of payments which may be made under the scheme,

(b) the descriptions of persons to whom such payments may be made,

(c) the person by whom such payments may be made,

(d) criteria to which that person is to have regard in deciding whether to make such payments, and

(e) the amounts of such payments or the basis on which such amounts are to be calculated.

(5) A scheme under this section may, in particular, provide for—

(a) payments under the scheme to be made subject to conditions specified in or determined under the scheme (including conditions as to repayment),

(b) the delegation of functions exercisable by virtue of the scheme (including the delegation of any discretion conferred by virtue of the scheme),

(c) the modification of the functions of a body established by an enactment, or the functions of the holder of an office created by an enactment, for the purpose of enabling the person concerned to exercise any functions conferred on that person by virtue of the scheme,

(d) the payment by the Secretary of State of fees to any person in respect of functions exercised by that person by virtue of the scheme.

(6) The power to make a scheme under this section shall not be exercised without the consent of the Treasury.'.—*[Mr. Byers.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment (a) to the proposed new clause, in line 1, leave out "may" and insert "shall".

Amendment (b) to the proposed new clause, in line 35, at end add—

'(7) The Secretary of State shall make an order under this section within three months of the commencement of this Act'.

Amendment No. 71, in clause 41, page 27, line 14, at end insert—

'and—

(c) their financial viability'.

Government amendments Nos. 34, 42, 44 and 46.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) was right to say that on Second Reading I said that we wished to introduce a clause to provide the opportunity for a subsidy to be made available to the post office network. I said that I hoped that we would be able to do that in Committee, but we did not table a new clause in Committee, and I apologise to the House for the fact that we did not have an opportunity to do so.

I took the decision—some hon. Members may criticise me for it—that a new clause providing a subsidy would be so significant that it would be better for it to be debated on Report by the whole House. More hon. Members will be able to debate the matter on Report than would have been able to debate it in Committee. I was trying to provide as many opportunities to participate in the debate to as many hon. Members as possible. That is why the new clause is being debated on Report.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for being so open and honest with the House in saying that this debate should be an opportunity for the whole House to discuss the provision. However, as the matter was so well thought out and so much in the Department's mind, will he just remind the House when the Government tabled the new clause, so that we could consider it properly? Was it tabled in good time to allow us to consider it, or not until after last week's Opposition day debate, which put more pressure on him?

Mr. Byers: Considerable pressure was, of course, caused by last week's half-day Opposition debate, but that pressure was perhaps not so great as that caused by the 3 million signature petition organised by the sub-postmasters, or the very effective lobby of Parliament that they conducted last Wednesday. That probably brought far more pressure to bear on the Government than did a three-hour debate on these important issues.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, new clause 1 was tabled with all the other Government new clauses and amendments. It was prepared earlier, but, as is often the custom, the Government tabled all the new clauses and amendments in one batch. We have consistently dealt with this matter in that manner.

I shall now deal with the substance of new clause 1.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that he did not table new clause 1 before Parliament debated the matter because he thinks that parliamentary debates are so irrelevant and ineffective that Parliament should be ill informed and not consider the relevant clauses when it considers the matter—as it did last week, both in Westminster Hall and in this place?

Mr. Byers: No. The right hon. Gentleman, perhaps deliberately, misunderstands the point that I am trying to make. I felt that it was more appropriate that the whole House should have the opportunity of debating a subsidy

[Mr. Byers]

for the post office network on Report, rather than my reserving the debate for hon. Members who happened to serve on the Standing Committee. Many hon. Members who are now in the Chamber did not serve on that Committee, but may wish to participate in the debate. I feel that they should have the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): The Secretary of State is saying that Parliament should have the opportunity to debate this important issue. Although he may rely on that reason, he made a commitment on Second Reading. He may have decided just after Second Reading that the matter was too important for the Committee alone to deal with, but he has had plenty of time since then to table the new clause. Why did he not, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) said, table the new clause before last Wednesday, when the House had the opportunity to debate the matter both in Westminster Hall and on the Floor of the House? The House could have fully debated the issue twice—both in last week's debates and, today, on Report—thereby having two bites at the cherry.

Mr. Byers: The record will show that my comment on Second Reading came in reply to a very specific question from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), who asked whether the Bill would provide for a subsidy. I answered as truthfully as I could. I said that we had hoped that we would be able to table a new clause to that effect.

I think that the hon. Member for West Dorset would agree that last week's debates in Westminster Hall and in the House were on the broad principles of the support that should be given to the post office network, not on the detail that we are now considering on new clause 1. I think that it would be far better for the House if we were now to consider the detail of the new clause, rather than wondering whether it would have been better to deal with that detail in Committee, in Westminster Hall or in last week's Opposition day debate.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: Not on that point, as I should like to make some progress. The hon. Gentleman will undoubtedly try to catch the eye of the occupant of the Chair in this important debate.

4 pm

New clause 1 is significant. As I said in the House on 12 April:

> The power is a safeguard, intended to keep open the option of financial assistance.—[*Official Report*, 12 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 385.]

We feel that it is appropriate to have such a safeguard, for two reasons. First, it is not every year that the House has the opportunity to debate a Bill on postal services, so it seems appropriate that we should use the opportunity to provide the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry with the power to establish the type of scheme outlined in new clause 1.

Secondly, there is concern among sub-postmasters and mistresses in rural communities and inner-city areas about the effect of moving to a system of automated credit transfer between 2003 and 2005. The Government acknowledge the concerns that exist following the adoption of that policy. It may be that, at some future date, it would be appropriate to establish such a scheme, and that is what new clause 1 seeks to do.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): If the Secretary of State were considering buying a post office and he was told that the Government were keeping open the option of providing financial assistance at some unspecified date in the future, would that give him the confidence that he would need before going ahead?

Mr. Byers: Yes, it would. For the first time, we will have in statute the power for the Secretary of State to make such payments. At the moment, the Post Office has a degree of social responsibility and is prepared to make a subsidy available to the post office network. It has done so in the recent past. We are giving the Post Office a new commercial freedom. Within that context, it may feel that it does not have the responsibility to meet social obligations, and that it would rather the Government, or some other agency, had that power or responsibility.

New clause 1 supports the clear distinction that is being made between the commercial role of the Post Office in future and the social and wider role that the post office network can play. That raises the important issue of who should fund the post office network to meet those social obligations, or any new services that the Government may feel the network is suited to provide. Our vision for the post office network in the future is that it begins to broaden its role, responsibilities and functions. I know that postmasters and mistresses are keen to develop a new role for the post office network, and perhaps a subsidy could be the appropriate way of supporting such a role in the future.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Does the Secretary of State recall giving a commitment that it was the Government's intention to continue to maintain a national network of sub-post offices? Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that many post offices—particularly in my constituency—depend on the service we are discussing, and that 30 to 40 per cent. of their work is wrapped up in it? Does he envisage a subsidy of that level to maintain the network?

Mr. Byers: We will want to discuss with the various interested parties the nature of any scheme that might be introduced. I know that there is concern about the implications of ACT. That is why we have said clearly that pensioners and benefit recipients who now get cash over the counter at post offices will continue to have that choice—not just until 2003, or between then and 2005, but thereafter.

It is for postmasters and mistresses to say to people that they must make it clear that they want to continue to have their benefit or pension paid in cash at the post office, and that that choice will remain. Many are doing that. There is real potential for people to maintain a high level of income and support for the post office network and the way in which benefits are paid.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because he is a trifle opaque in his presentation of the argument. Who is the mysterious person referred to in new clause 1(2)? Will the Secretary of State confirm, notwithstanding what he said in the Opposition day debate last week, that the clause is purely permissive, not prescriptive, and offers no guarantee to beleaguered post offices in Stewkley, Marsh Gibbon and elsewhere in my constituency? Will he therefore tell the House now whether any regulations flowing from the new clause will be subject to the negative or the affirmative procedure?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman is being slightly opaque in raising some of those issues. My understanding is that the regulations will be dealt with under the affirmative procedure, and I hope that I will be able to confirm that point in due course. We will be able to have a useful debate and constructive dialogue about the important issues concerned. The scheme will be permissive and there will be no obligation to introduce it. However, when the power to introduce such schemes lies on the statute book, I have no doubt that the Secretary of State will be under considerable pressure between now and 2003 to introduce one. It is appropriate that such pressure should be brought to bear, and whoever holds the office will no doubt respond positively to those developments.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): Does the Secretary of State understand the concerns of sub-post office owners who are deciding whether to expand and invest or sell up and retire? On the one hand, they have the certainty that in 2003 they will lose a substantial proportion of what they are paid for the service they provide in making pension and Benefits Agency payments. On the other hand, they have the uncertainty about whether a subsidy will be paid. What advice would the Secretary of State give to people in that quandary?

Mr. Byers: For the first time we are providing a power for the Secretary of State to introduce a scheme. We will want to discuss the nature of any such scheme with interested parties, including representatives of sub-postmasters and mistresses. We will debate later whether it would be appropriate to provide that any such scheme should be introduced within a particular period; I do not think that it would. However, I recognise that arguments will be made in favour of establishing a scheme, and after the Bill has received Royal Assent, we will want to work out the details of such a scheme with interested parties.

I should stress that in the interim the Post Office will still have the power to provide support for the network, and that support is given in different ways. For example, Government support is provided to ensure that the Horizon system is put in place.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The Secretary of State is in danger of undermining the Committee system, because hon. Members will not gaily volunteer to serve assiduously on Committees if Ministers keep the most interesting clauses for Report stage.

The right hon. Gentleman keeps referring to discussions with interested parties, but those discussions will be pointless unless people have some idea of what sums might be allocated to the schemes. The new clause specifically states that

> The power to make a scheme . . . shall not be exercised without the consent of the Treasury.

Therefore, the Secretary of State will have to make a bid for a scheme under a public expenditure survey line. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the money will come from the Department of Trade and Industry PES line? When would such a bid be put in and what sums would he envisage bidding for? If he is opaque about that, the suspicion will arise that the new clause is a smokescreen to buy off sub-postmasters and mistresses.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman shows that he has been out of ministerial office for several years, because PES lines no longer exist. We now live in the world of DEL and AME—the departmental expenditure limit and annually managed expenditure. The scheme would come under DEL, but all Government expenditure is controlled, in one way or another, by the Treasury. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) certainly knows that. That is the situation in which we exist. When a scheme such as this is being established, it is not unusual to specify in legislation that any expenditure linked with it would be subject to Treasury approval.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way; he appreciates how important this matter is for many hon. Members. I do not want to press him on the detail, as I know that the scheme needs proper negotiation and consultation, but it is clear that there will have to be a test of the viability of bringing sub-post offices into the scheme. I am especially interested in those offices where sub-postmasters and mistresses receive a salary because of the difficulties involved in a pro rata return. What advantage or disadvantage will the new scheme bring for those people?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend has been a strong campaigner for the post office network, both in his constituency and more widely. The services offered by a post office and its role in its community will be among the key factors that we will want to take into account when considering whether a subsidy is appropriate. Such matters would need to be considered in the context of any scheme that is brought forward.

For the benefit of the House, and in response to the earlier question from the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), I can confirm that orders under new clause 1 will be made under the affirmative procedure. We will therefore be able to engage in the debate to which the hon. Gentleman so looks forward.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is moving in the right direction, as he has recognised that a problem exists. He has said that he can give no time scale for the subsidy, and that he cannot say what amount of money will be involved, but can he offer a time scale for the talks leading to a subsidy? The Government must engage with sub-postmasters and mistresses, and with the Post Office,

[Mr. David Heath]

to see what can be done—either by the Post Office or through Government subsidy in due course—to resolve the problems that those people face here and now.

Mr. Byers: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. This is an important moment in the development of the post office network. I do not want a long period to elapse between parliamentary approval for this proposal and the finalisation of the details of the scheme.

I would be slightly reluctant to start work on those details before the Bill receives Royal Assent, as difficulties might arise in another place if it were thought that the Government were acting before proper parliamentary approval had been given to setting up the scheme. However, I think that there will be informal opportunities to discuss the form and nature of the scheme, and we could begin that process very soon. If the Bill were to receive Royal Assent by the summer recess, that might be the time to engage formally with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters about the details of the scheme.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way so frequently. We welcome the proposed subsidy, although the opacity of the proposal has aroused much concern. On Second Reading, the right hon. Gentleman said that it was likely that the Cabinet Office's performance and innovation unit would produce a report while the Bill was being considered. That report would have helped enormously this afternoon. When will it be available?

Mr. Byers: My understanding is that the unit is still considering some details in the report. It hopes to report to the Prime Minister soon after Easter, and he will then announce his view of its work. The unit is addressing a number of key issues, and the question of access criteria is the most relevant to the Bill. I would have preferred the House to have the opportunity to look at the unit's findings. That would have been appropriate given that access criteria are provided for in the Bill, and I regret that the report is not available at present.

I think that the report has proved to be a far more comprehensive look at the network than was originally intended. That is welcome, because this is an important moment for the post office network. There is a chance to consider a new way for it to develop. The performance and innovation unit report will provide us with the opportunity of looking in some detail at how the network will look, not simply in six months or six years, but in the foreseeable future in the 21st century.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who has been customarily generous in giving way. Does he agree that transparency is of the essence here? Given that the new clause refers to payments being made by the Secretary of State or by a person on his behalf, is there not a legitimate anxiety that, unless the access criteria are abundantly clear and specific, the new clause could be used for partisan purposes to provide much needed finance to struggling post offices in marginal constituencies that concern the right hon. Gentleman rather than going to constituencies on the basis of commercial need?

4.15 pm

Mr. Byers: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman, because he has already raised the issue of who this mysterious person might be. It could be a number of people, or it could be a body. It could be the Secretary of State, officials designated by the Secretary of State or an organisation such as the Countryside Agency—it depends on the nature of the scheme. However it is will have the authority to make payments under the scheme if that is the way in which the scheme is developed. There is a degree of flexibility. I was going to say, "It could be you"—I did not mean you, Madam Speaker—but unless the electorate changes dramatically, I cannot see the hon. Gentleman being Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for a little while yet. However, he is young, and who knows? His chance may come.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I was reflecting on the intervention of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). In view of the leak to *The Mirror* on Monday, I assume that he was referring to marginal Conservative constituencies, because our prospect of winning a considerable number of them at the next election.

Mr. Byers: I think that that is right. When I saw the leaked document, I was not sure whether it was a deliberate ploy by the Conservatives to lull Labour supporters into a false sense of security. However, as my right hon. Friend knows, Labour supporters are never lulled into a false sense of security—a false sense of insecurity, perhaps.

I now turn to the details of new clause 1, which may answer some of right hon. and hon. Members' questions. The new clause allows the Secretary of State to establish a scheme or schemes for making payments for the purpose of

(a) assisting in the provision of public post offices or public post offices of a particular description, or

(b) assisting in the provision of services to be provided from public post offices or public post offices or a particular description.

The reason for that distinction is that some post offices will, by their very nature, deserve financial support. With other post offices, the services that they provide will be worthy of public support. That touches on the point about the Post Office of the future, in which services might be provided on behalf of the Government. If we wish the Post Office to offer those services, it may be appropriate to provide a subsidy for it to do just that. The new clause allows us to make the distinction between a post office that may be deserving of financial assistance, and a particular service that is provided by a post office.

Mr. McLoughlin: I am uneasy about subsidies that will, by their very nature, mean rules and regulations whereby some post offices will qualify while others will not. Did the Secretary of State consider the possibility of ensuring that sub-postmasters were paid the national minimum wage, which is not currently the case?

Mr. Byers: That is a separate issue, which relates to people who have a contract of employment. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is now a strong supporter of the national minimum wage. He voted against it at every opportunity during its legislative passage through the

House, so I am glad that, like the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, he now recognises its benefits. It is a matter of regret that we do not have the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) with us. I understand that he is in hospital—it is unfortunate that he is not in the Chamber to take part in the debate.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is listening.

Mr. Byers: If he is listening to our proceedings, he will know that I recognise that he remains a strong opponent of a national minimum wage. However, I am pleased to hear that the hon. Member for West Derbyshire recognises its importance. The answer to his question is that sub-postmasters are not covered by the minimum wage provisions because they are not under a contract of employment.

In addition to the new clause, Government amendment No. 44 makes it clear that the scheme must follow the affirmative procedure, which will allow debate to take place. There are other minor Government amendments, too, that will ensure that the scheme is effective.

I turn briefly to the amendments in the name of the hon. Member for Weston–super–Mare (Mr. Cotter). I think that he seeks to introduce a time limit by which the scheme should be introduced. I do not think that it is appropriate to try to restrict us to three months. We need effective and proper dialogue with all interested parties to ensure that any scheme that is introduced is effective and has broad support among those who are likely to be affected by it.

I am aware that the real concern has arisen in relation to the effects of automated credit transfer. That process will not start until January 2003. There will then be a phased approach to ACT on the part of the Benefits Agency, lasting until 2005. If there is to be a scheme, it is important that we have in place one that can meet the requirements in those circumstances. We will seek to address that possible mischief by developing a particular scheme.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who has indeed been generous in giving way.

Before we leave behind us the question of subsidy for certain post offices and the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) that there will be a disparity between those who are subsidised and those who are not, let us consider the European dimension. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that many of us are concerned that the Post Office cannot compete as freely as we would like with, for example, German operators? If he is to introduce subsidies to the British arm of that competitive game, will he have to clear them with Brussels? Will we have a long wait while competition issues are deliberated upon?

Mr. Byers: There are two specific matters, both of which are covered in the Bill. The first is the post office network. I would like to think that most right hon. and hon. Members recognise that the power to have a scheme that can provide a subsidy is appropriate in the circumstances. A separate issue is how we can make the Post Office more competitive in the services that it operates. I have no doubt that the measures that we are introducing through the Bill will ensure that the Post Office becomes increasingly competitive. That is the only way in which it will survive in an increasingly competitive European postal market. That is the challenge that it will face. I have no doubt that it must become more commercially minded. It must be prepared to recognise that it will need to begin to compete in areas that are presently reserved as part of its monopoly. I have no doubt that the situation will change.

When the Postal Services Commission begins to consider these issues, I hope that it will recognise the importance of providing competition that will raise standards so that the public have better service provision. Obviously that needs to be compatible with the universal service obligation, and I am sure that it will be. I am sure that competition will be highly effective.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I knew that that would have an effect.

Mr. Burns: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on a different point?

Mr. Byers: If the hon. Gentleman wants to make a different point, I shall give way first to the hon. Member for West Dorset.

Mr. Letwin: I have an entirely different point, too, and have sat patiently in the hope of hearing it answered so that I need not ask the question. Will the Secretary of State explain what the subsidy is intended to achieve? Does he intend it to cover the transition period during which there will be a lack of investment in new technology, is it intended to be a permanent subsidy, or has he not considered which of those objectives he intends to achieve?

Mr. Byers: I had intended to discuss how the subsidy might be used when I addressed the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton. Essentially, it is intended to ensure the continued viability of a sub-post office, and it can take a number of forms. A post office may be commercially viable without subsidy, but we might none the less feel it appropriate to provide financial support because we wanted it to provide an additional service on the Government's behalf. In effect, we would pay that post office for doing that, possibly through a subsidy. A range of different reasons might apply, all of which are covered by the wide-ranging provisions of new clause 1, which will allow the Secretary of State to introduce a scheme that will meet those obligations. That is why new clause 1 distinguishes between support for a post office, which will probably have to do with its commercial viability, and subsidy for a particular service that a post office might provide.

I said that I would give way to the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns).

Mr. Burns: As a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Gentleman may understand more than most how the Treasury works. I note that new clause 1(6) says that no scheme can be

exercised without the consent of the Treasury.

[Mr. Burns]

From the right hon. Gentleman's speech, we have learned that the scheme envisaged in the new clause is highly nebulous. No one, not even the right hon. Gentleman himself, knows how much the subsidy will cost the taxpayer. The Secretary of State must know that the Treasury will never give him an open-ended commitment to provide unlimited public funds. The amounts involved in his two-pronged approach to subsidy could be massive. What discussions has he held with the Treasury, and what assurances or restrictions has the Treasury given him, regarding the circumstances in which it will or will not consent to the scheme?

Mr. Byers: The fact that we can lay a proposal for the scheme before the House is the result of many and various discussions with the Treasury. The Treasury supports the giving of a power for such a scheme to be established, but we shall have to work on the details. The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that there should never be an open-ended cheque; that would be no way to deal with public finances, and no one would expect the Treasury to offer one. We seek targeted financial support to help with the viability of a post office or to encourage it to provide services of benefit to the Government.

Through amendment No. 71, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton asks that information about the viability of specific post offices should be given to the commission. That would extend the remit of the commission to providing advice to the Government on the financial viability of public post offices. I ask the House to resist the amendment because I do not feel that that is a correct role for the commission, whose central role is to regulate licensed postal markets and the operators who are licensed, and to give them a primary duty to ensure the universal provision of postal services at a uniform tariff. We should not wish the commission to be diverted from that challenging and important responsibility by having an additional responsibility to provide advice to the Secretary of State on the commercial viability of individual post offices.

I hope that the hon. Member for Weston–super–Mare will not press his amendments to new clause 1, and that amendment No. 71 will not be pressed, either. I hope that all Members can support new clause 1. It will provide the Secretary of State with the power to introduce a scheme to provide a subsidy. Sub-postmasters and mistresses throughout the country will respond positively to the way in which the House has listened to their concerns and has noted the 3 million strong petition that was received last week. The House and the Government are prepared to listen and to respond positively; new clause 1 does precisely that. I ask the House to accept it.

4.30 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South–West Hertfordshire): May I tell the House—especially the Secretary of State and the Minister—that I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) is not in the Chamber today? Her absence is unavoidable, as she is either collecting her husband from hospital or taking him there. The absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) has also been mentioned; as we speak, he is undergoing the attentions of a surgeon who is removing his appendix. No one regrets his absence at this moment more than me.

As the Secretary of State has pointed out, the new clause would enable payments to be made to assist in the provision of public post offices or of the services that they offer. We welcome the measure. I can give the Secretary of State some comfort, because I shall not recommend that we vote against it—although what my hon. Friends do is up to them. However, I should be disappointed if they voted against the new clause.

I am certain that the new clause will receive a widespread welcome; it addresses issues of long-standing concern to people throughout the United Kingdom—in inner cities as well as in rural areas. We make much of the rural problem, but the difficulties are just as acute in some inner-city areas.

Those worries were generated by the Government's thoughtlessness in introducing the automated credit transfer system before establishing how an income for sub-post offices would be provided. The matter has been the subject of innumerable debates in the House; indeed, last Wednesday, there were debates in both Westminster Hall and in the Chamber.

The House will remember Corporal Jones from "Dad's Army"; he was the one who rushed around, saying "Don't panic, don't panic". If the Secretary of State were a little greyer and wore a little moustache, he would look rather like Corporal Jones. Recently, he too has been rushing around saying, "Don't panic"—whether over the money for Rover, when that matter went sadly wrong; over the money for energy that was announced because the coal industry is going wrong; or over new clause 1, which was introduced because of worries in the Post Office. I am sorry to say that the new clause well merits the title of a "Corporal Jones" clause.

Mr. Baldry: At least in yesterday's statement on energy, the House was told how much money would be involved—there will be £100 million for the coal industry. The Secretary of State has given us no indication as to whether the subsidy for the post offices is £10 million, £50 million or £100 million, or whether the whole £400 million savings from the move to ACT will be included. We have been told neither how substantial that subsidy will be, nor what will trigger it. Discussions will apparently be held with a person; we know that that person could be anyone in the world apart from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). In the light of those points, can we be satisfied as to the validity of the new clause?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend served on the Standing Committee, so he is well aware of all the Bill's provisions. He makes a valid point. Despite the Secretary of State's protestations, unfortunately, the new clause should have been tabled much earlier in the Bill's proceedings. We could then have taken more detailed advice and gone into greater depth on the matter. We could have held consultations—especially with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, and obtained more detailed information on their views.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Page: If my hon. Friend will hold his horses for 30 seconds, I will of course give way. I believe that the expression "a blank cheque" is a valid and accurate description of the new clause.

Mr. Bercow: As my hon. Friend knows, I am of a naturally suspicious turn of mind. Given the latest demonstration from the Secretary of State of pork-barrel politics that we witnessed yesterday afternoon, does my hon. Friend agree that, whatever the merits of the proposed new subsidy, we simply cannot be certain about its impartial distribution? Is there not a danger that it could be used by a Secretary of State, if not the present incumbent, as a slush fund to bail out beleaguered Labour Members in marginal constituencies?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend makes his point in his usual delicate fashion. It will not have escaped the Secretary of State's notice that my hon. Friend has a few concerns in this area. I believe that those are justifiable concerns, because the new clause uses the following phraseology:

> Payments under a scheme under this section shall be made by the Secretary of State or by another person.

It would really help if we could discover who that "another person" might be. That is another failing that results from the tabling of an amendment of this nature at so late a stage.

Surely the Government would have had no difficulty in tabling the amendment in Committee. It could then have been debated in Committee and it would not have been above the wit and wisdom of the serried ranks of officials that the Minister and the Secretary of State have at their beck and call to devise some small amendment that would have provided an opportunity for the clause to be fully debated on the Floor of the House.

I believe that the new clause is a panic measure. The cost is as long as a piece of string—I might mix all the metaphors and bring in the "blank cheque" introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). The only time when I felt that the Secretary of State was speaking from his political heart was when he said that the lobby of a couple of thousand postmasters, and the thought of 3 million signatures dropping into the foyer of No. 10 Downing street, helped to concentrate his mind on the matter.

Mr. Chidgey: If I remember correctly, the hon. Gentleman said at the start of his address that he was in favour of a subsidy, although he has now described it as something rather different. Would a subsidised Post Office be part of his party's vision of a privatised Post Office?

Mr. Page: Although it is understandable that the hon. Gentleman wants me to outline our party policy on these measures, he has been in the House long enough to know that it is a remarkably naive shadow Minister who starts to make up policy on the hoof without knowing the exact position that the party that is successful at the general election will face when it takes over and looks at the books. To place such a hostage to fortune on the record now would make me seem greener than I may already be. I certainly will not give that commitment, but I will say that, in view of the mess that the Government have got themselves into, we welcome this provision in the short term until we find out what the true position will be.

I put it to the House that the Bill is being introduced at completely and utterly the wrong time. It should not have been introduced before we knew the contents of the report by the performance and innovation unit, or before the guidelines on the social and environmental issues had been decided. We should not have been looking at this before knowing exactly the whole question of social exclusion and the problems that will face some rural and urban areas.

Mr. Prior: Is it my hon. Friend's understanding that the subsidy is to replace the income forgone by post offices as a result of the change to automated transfers, or will it be made available for post offices that are undertaking social and community services?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend makes the flattering assumption that I am a Government Minister and will be able to answer. It is because we have such an opaque new clause before us that my hon. Friend asks the question. I cannot answer it; I do not know. I hope that when the Secretary of State responds he will pick up this point, that perhaps a message will come from afar and he will be able to give my hon. Friend an answer. My hon. Friend makes a legitimate and justifiable point, but I have to fail to give him a response.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that at least one definite response can be given to my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior)? It is that, if the subsidy were intended to replace the entire income, given that it is ungeared and is bringing about no footfall, unlike the current system of benefit administration, it would have to exceed £400 million in order to make good the shortfall.

Mr. Page: I do not know whether that is strictly correct, because the saving of the £400 million involves some administrative costs, such as those for printing the various benefit books. Therefore, I wonder whether the figure would run to £400 million. The calculation becomes a little more delicate and complicated, because pensioners and benefit claimants who go into the post office obtain cash and spend some of it in the shop. I know that sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses are concerned about losing that extra revenue. I think that my hon. Friend is over-egging it with a total of £400 million, but the loss of revenue in the form of money that will not be spent in the shop is another calculation.

Mr. Letwin: I accept my hon. Friend's well-measured adjustment of my terms. I agree that the sum need not be in excess of a total of £400 million, but does he agree that it is almost inconceivable that the Treasury would ever accede to a continuing subsidy of that order of magnitude in order to try to replace, on a permanent basis, the amount lost? Does he also agree that the Secretary of State notably refused to reply in a clear-minded way when asked whether this was intended to be a temporary, transitional subsidy or a permanent one?

Mr. Page: One of the delights of answering interventions in my stumbling and humble fashion is that

[Mr. Page]

doing so pulls out of order the comments that I shall make in my few, short, immortal words to the House. Therefore, I ask my hon. Friend to relax—*[Interruption.]* No, not to shut up; my hon. Friend is making a perfectly valid and highly intelligent point, but it is one that I should like to deal with a little later.

Mr. McLoughlin: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Page: When one's Deputy Chief Whip asks one to give way, one does not have much alternative.

Mr. McLoughlin: Does not this show that the Secretary of State has, to a degree, treated the Committee and the House with contempt? Had it been possible to discuss the matter in Committee, we could more easily have put these questions to the Minister, obtained the answers and had a fuller debate when we returned to the Floor of the House. It is partly because we have not had time to look at the new clause and question the Minister in great detail that we shall be unable to have answers to many of the questions to which we want answers today.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend puts the point much more forcibly than I have. I simply said that I felt that it would have been better if the whole matter had come before the Committee. As I said, I am sure that a small amendment could then have been made to put it in order for it to be discussed more fully on the Floor of the House. However, the truth is that—I was not joking when I described it as a Corporal Jones clause—nothing happened until 2,000 sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses descended on the House and on Downing street with their petition. Lo and behold, out came an opaque new clause that might provide the money to help them.

4.45 pm

I endorse the view that it would have been much better to discuss this issue in Committee. Outside of this rather formal setting, we could have had a much more casual and relaxed talk about how the new clause might operate. I wonder whether the Government know how it will operate. I have the horrible feeling that it was made up on the hoof and that only later will we discover exactly how it will work.

This point has been raised, but I wonder whether there have been difficulties in the discussions between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Treasury over the scale of the financial support to be given. Has the DTI, in any shape or form, given the Treasury an idea of how much that support might be? If it has, the Secretary of State will be able to explain why the provision was not introduced when the Bill first came to the House or in the Chancellor's Budget statement. The Secretary of State makes much of annually managed expenditure—AME—but is that extra money or is it already provided for? If it is already provided for, we should know. If it is not, the new clause very much represents legislation on the hoof.

I was going to spend some time saying that it was a disservice and a discourtesy that the provision was not considered in Committee. However, my hon. Friends—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin)—have already made that point. When the Committee discussed the guidelines on social and environmental matters, I stressed several times how important it was that we knew what would be in them, so that we could help to frame the legislation. However, there was a rush to legislate and the country's requirements were deemed to be just something else to worry about.

The new clause has raised considerable expectations among those who run sub-post offices and their consumers. I hope that those expectations will not be disappointed, but the Government do not have a good reputation on that. They have a good reputation for spinning a good story, but, once the mists have dissipated, we find that real improvements have not been secured. It is up Ministers to ensure that they are and that those expectations are not disappointed.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Does my hon. Friend think that this late offer, with no sign of how long it will last, will repair the damage that has been done to the potential sale of sub-post offices to new owners? Will it prevent the closure of sub-post offices that is taking place at the moment?

Mr. Page: I am afraid that it will not. We must remember that £2 billion of privately owned money is in sub-post offices.

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): The figure is £1 billion.

Mr. Page: The figure has obviously depreciated considerably since I last heard it, but the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) has also touched on this issue. Until the Government put more flesh on new clause 1, no one will want to consider buying or exchanging a sub-post office, unless they are remarkably rich or remarkably brave.

As the Secretary of State pointed out, nestling among the Government new clause and amendments is our amendment, No. 71, which would introduce the concept of financial viability. Had we known that new clause 1 was to be tabled at such a late stage, and had we known about its contents, we might have redrafted our amendment. The future of the post office network has been a concern of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House for many years, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) said. Post offices' survival is critical to the well-being of people not only in rural areas but in inner cities. That is why Ministers of successive Governments have been called to the Dispatch Box many times over the years, and never more frequently than in the past few months, when there have been debates on the subject not only on the Floor of the House but, last week, in Westminster Hall. There is no reason for me to apologise for going over the ground again.

When I first read new clause 1, I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton and I might have to apologise for having charged the Government last week with lacking a coherent structure for the future of sub-post offices. When I read the new clause again, I realised that although, as my hon. Friends have pointed out, it makes welcome gestures towards the support of public post offices, it is remarkably lacking in substance and the House cannot assess the merits of the scheme in

detail. Nothing that the Secretary of State said at the Dispatch Box has given us further insight into how the scheme will work.

As my hon. Friends have pointed out on several occasions, the Secretary of State will take the powers necessary to subsidise those post offices and support the services that they provide. He—or, perhaps in future, she—will be able to prescribe what payments will be made for those purposes, to whom they will be made and the criteria to be adopted in making them. The amounts have yet to be determined. The right hon. Gentleman may delegate those roles to a subordinate body.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who has left the Chamber for a moment—no doubt he has gone to recharge his batteries—pointed out that those provisions might be a substantial source of party political bias. I hope that the Secretary of State will ensure that there is a proper arms-length method for applying those criteria and making payments. Hon. Members on both sides of the House must be satisfied on that point because the wheel will turn, the Conservative party will be back in government and the Secretary of State will be on this side of the Chamber with his nose pressed against the window of government. He will want to be sure that he has put in place a system that is seen to be fair, open and accountable. As I said, it would have been sensible to establish the scheme in Committee, rather than on Report.

I genuinely want to try to help the Secretary of State to fulfil his good intentions. Ever since his unfortunate experience with BMW and the Rover car company, I have thought of him as sharing the view of the famous playwright, Eugene Ionescu, that one can predict the future only after it has happened. The Secretary of State tends to take action when he should be planning ahead.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton and I tabled amendment No. 71, which would require the Postal Services Commission to advise the Secretary of State on the financial viability of public post offices serving communities throughout the country. It is pointless devising schemes to subsidise the network if accurate information is not available to the Secretary of State about the financial state of the post offices in our cities, towns and villages.

I had to smile slightly a moment ago when the right hon. Gentleman distanced the role of the commission from all this. Having read the Bill and taken part in the debates, I believe that the commission and, to a lesser extent, the council will have a pivotal role in deciding which post offices provide a vital service and should be kept in place. The amendment would place an explicit requirement on the Postal Services Commission to collect financial information and provide advice to the Secretary of State on its findings. That would be done after the commission had consulted the Consumer Council for Postal Services.

I fully expect that other bodies, such as the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters and the Countryside Alliance, will make representations to the Secretary of State before he comes to any decision about the scale of assistance that he is prepared to offer. I hope that he will answer the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) when he asked whether EU approval was necessary. The Secretary of State has rather fallen foul of EU approval on various announcements that he has made recently.

It would give encouragement and hope to sub-postmasters and postmistresses if they knew that the money was definitely coming and would not be subjected to the machinations of another organisation. That would go some way towards mitigating the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet about the viability of sub-post offices.

The Secretary of State will certainly need information about financial viability if he and the House are to take a well-judged view on the future of the post office network. Collecting the information should cause no difficulty to the Postal Services Commission, which will collect plenty of information anyway. It has a duty to collect information if required, and it can do so of its own accord.

I hope that the concerns of those who provide and use postal services are truly to the front of the Government's mind, and that the Minister will have second thoughts about a sensible amendment that will help him to achieve the objectives which I am sure he seeks.

As a matter of principle, it is fair to put it on the record—this may help the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey), who asked whether the Conservative party was in favour of subsidies—that we share the view of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters in its desire for income, not subsidies, for post offices. The new clause is needed only because the Government are proceeding with their disastrous policy switch to ACT, which threatens the survival of thousands of sub-post offices across Britain. As we know, the 3 million signatures on the petition were not calling for subsidy.

I shall put on record the reaction of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters to new clause 1. It stated:

> subpostmasters want to have a commercial living in viable and vibrant post offices. The prospect of existing on a subsidy therefore will not be a very pleasant one for them. We are however encouraged that the Government are looking for ways of supporting a network of post offices and if matters get to such a point then clearly subsidies, particularly temporary ones, may help to get the network through a very difficult phase.

The statement continues:

> We would set our face completely against local authorities giving subsidies because we think that we would rapidly lose control over the network as different local authorities will most certainly deal differently when faced with the need to subsidise and we must not forget that different local authorities may be under different political control. We cannot therefore work up any enthusiasm for that prospect.
>
> We would say the answer to the network is investment, not subsidy, allowing us time to get through this difficult period and out the other end. As they say, give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, give him a fishing rod and teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.

Do the Government intend subsidies to be paid by local authorities? Will they give sub-postmasters that fishing rod, so that they can have financial viability and independence?

5 pm

On Second Reading, the Secretary of State said:

> We should not jump to the conclusion that we should always look for a subsidy from central Government. Other public organisations such as local authorities may want to invest if they think it is appropriate to provide a subsidy but, as we are introducing a Bill that we would like to think will be on the statute book for a good number of years, it is sensible to cover all possibilities.—[*Official Report*, 15 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 805.]

[Mr. Page]

In the event of subsidies' being paid, how will the Government ensure equity, so that one post office is not disadvantaged by another's receipt of subsidy? I believe that that balance—that equity—is most important.

Although at the outset I welcomed the new clause in principle, it is not apparent why a new clause drafted in such general and unspecific terms was not included in the Bill at the start. It would have been preferable for us to be able to examine it more closely in Committee, and to hear from the Secretary of State or the Minister the details that lay behind it. Is it, in fact, such a last-minute panic measure that Ministers do not know what the back-up will be, and how the new clause will work?

Perhaps the belated appearance of the new clause is due to a disagreement between the Treasury and the DTI about the scale and terms of the financial support that will be offered to the post office network. Perhaps, like my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), I am unduly suspicious, but the Minister has still not given a good explanation of why the provision was not announced on Second Reading—or, indeed, of why the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not mention it in his Budget statement. The sums involved are surely of a size to merit some attention in a Budget statement.

The new clause will have raised considerable expectations throughout the country among those running sub-post offices. It will also have raised expectations among customers hoping that their post offices will be saved. I hope that those expectations will not be disappointed. It is one thing to enter into broad, vague, nebulous commitments of the kind envisaged in the new clause; it is a quantum leap to carry them into positive effect.

Once the mist engendered by this exercise has dispersed, those people will want to see real results. They will want to see post offices that have been threatened with closure saved, and new ones opening. It is up to Ministers to ensure that, if public money is used for this purpose, such benefits occur. If they do not occur, and are not seen to occur, the House and the country will know that this has been little more than a public-relations exercise.

Mr. Drew: Unlike Conservative Members who have given the new clause a curmudgeonly welcome, I give it, along with the Government amendments grouped with it, a warm welcome. This is an important initiative and, if the Government are accused of having listened, so much the better. There has been a major campaign, led—dare I say—by the *Western Daily Press* in my area, and taken up by many other newspapers and media outlets. It has touched a raw nerve. We all know about the problems from which sub-post offices suffer. There is a wonderful irony in being lectured by the Opposition. They accuse us of precipitate action yet they failed to tackle the problems. They had 18 years in which to act, but they did not intend to pursue the policy that the new clause outlines. It is mildly amusing that they will vote in favour of it—or, at least, not against it—while Conservative Front-Bench Members maintain that they support privatisation. I do not know how they resolve that contradiction.

Mr. Lilley: In welcoming the new clause as a major step forward, does not the hon. Gentleman tacitly admit that Government policy of compelling people to have benefits paid into bank accounts instead of a post office potentially threatens the post office network, thus making the subsidy necessary? Without the policy, the new clause would be neither necessary nor a major initiative.

Mr. Drew: We have held that debate so often in the past, I hoped that the right hon. Gentleman would have got it right by now. There is no compulsion; people from the Prime Minister down have the right to choose the way in which they wish to draw their benefits. That will remain the case. If we changed that, it would not stop the decline in the sub-post office network. The new clause gets to the root of the problems. We need some form of subvention, for which the details need to be worked out. The Government are pledged to do that, and we should therefore welcome the new clause and consider its implementation.

I agreed with the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) that having the performance and innovation unit report would help. It would tease out some of the details that we require. The report is a major piece of work for which we have waited for some months. The longer we wait, the more detail it will hopefully contain. It will then better be able to show the way in which new clause 1 can be implemented.

Mr. Letwin: Like me, the hon. Gentleman has participated in many debates on the Bill. Does he support permanent subsidies to sub-post offices as a way forward in principle?

Mr. Drew: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to advance my thoughts, I shall explain my approach. I do not oppose the idea that the Government should provide more income to help the sub-post office network, which clearly needs additional income. I do not mind whether the money is a subsidy or in a different form. The campaigns and speeches of hon. Members from all parties have alerted us to the problem, and the new clause presents a method of dealing with it. I hope that I can explain that briefly.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The question of payment—subsidy or not—arises because decisions between Departments have resulted in the withdrawal of £400 million from the sub-post office network. How much of that sum should be replaced by payments under new clause 1?

Mr. Drew: I cannot give a categorical answer about the money because that is up to the Government Front Bench, but I hope that we will think ahead about the extent to which we can help individual sub-post offices while maintaining the overall network.

I believe that the Minister for Competitiveness agreed with the view that I expressed in an Opposition day debate last week. We must strike a balance between the amount that we grant individual sub-post offices to help them through temporary difficulties or to find methods to build for the future and the way in which we help the whole network. My answer is to increase the speed of the evolution of smart cards. I do not believe that that will be achieved entirely by the public sector, but it might be done by the public and private sectors in harness. I should like that to happen.

The Opposition have created difficulties for us. There is nothing wrong with that in some respects, but they have sold their view that our policy is ACT or nothing, and that has made it more difficult for us to present our case to the sub-postmasters and mistresses. Some of us have always believed that ACT should be considered in addition to the obvious answer: the evolution of the smart card. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State can speak for himself, but we heard clarification on that matter during the debate initiated by the Opposition last week.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Drew: If the hon. Gentleman will please excuse me, I must continue.

The nub of the debate is the degree to which the Government can support investment in the smart card as we would want it to be and the way in which they can help individual sub-post offices. We must decide how best to use our money and how to influence the sub-post office structure to keep the universal service obligation. I have already said that I wish that I knew how the official Opposition would keep it if they followed their route of privatisation. We must keep the entrepreneurial spirit of individual post offices alive while giving support through the pay structure and the other ways in which payments are made already.

Such matters are complicated, but a considerable number of community sub-post offices already rely—not exclusively, but to a large extent—on a subsidy or a salary payment. That is what I was trying to get at in my question to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. We can enhance and extend that system, but our proposals must be clear. The discussions need to be based on that fact and taken forward from there. The detail will emerge from the consultations and negotiations, but, as well as providing stability and value for money, the system must be fair and transparent. All those issues are important. They must be talked through with the various organisations that will have both a part to play and a view on the proposals.

I welcome new clause 1. We should recognise that structures will change, but that is not the only way forward and in no way do I wish to denigrate the many thousands of businesses that make up the sub-post offices network. Some people or businesses already own a succession of sub-post offices, which may provide stability, but I want to see the community enterprise idea alive and well. That may be a way to retain services in villages and suburban areas, but it may also allow us to reintroduce them. That is happening in villages in my constituency. The village shop in Whiteshill has close links with the sub-post office and Coaley provides an example of how services—the most important of which is the postal service—could be reintroduced. If a village shop can work in harness with the sub-post office, there is much more chance of the service being retained.

New clause 1 represents an important new dimension to the discussion and the proposals cannot be introduced soon enough because we are losing sub-post offices. That is nothing new and there are no quick fixes. If there were, I presume that the previous Government would have produced some, but they failed lamentably. It is important to guarantee the universal service obligation, which is what the Bill is largely about. We have put on record the fact that we want a network of sub-post offices, for now and the future, and the proposals constitute the way in which that should be done.

It is important to strike a balance in the debate. Some of us have watched it assiduously and have made suggestions and it is good that the Government have listened not only to the campaign outside, but to what hon. Members on both sides of the House have said. That is why new clause 1 should be welcomed unreservedly. Rather than go on the defensive, we should begin to enhance the chances of our sub-post offices so that they have a genuine future.

Mr. Cotter: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) is unwell and I am sure that we all wish him well. The hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) made up for the hon. Gentleman's absence—he spoke for two, given the time that he waxed lyrical. I thank the Secretary of State for introducing new clause 1, which represents a welcome gesture for sub-post offices.

As the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) has said, we have had many debates on the matter. I could rehearse all the arguments, but I shall not do so because they are on record. There is still a serious issue about sub-post offices. I am glad that the Secretary of State accepts that the performance and innovation unit report is key. I hope that it will advance the debate quickly, once we have it.

5.15 pm

I congratulate the Secretary of State on the open way in which he was so opaque. His opacity and openness have been the striking part of the debate so far. He achieved a delicate balance, and he did it extremely well. In tabling the amendments, the Liberal Democrats are endeavouring to strengthen the new clause. We welcome what the Government have come forward with, but we need a much clearer answer from the Secretary of State. It has been a rather rushed job. The decision had to be made to come forward with something, but we need the detail.

Confidence is the clear and concerning issue for those small businesses, the sub-post offices. Without confidence, customers will find other routes, as they are doing, to meet their needs, but, most particularly, sub-postmasters and mistresses do not feel that they can invest in something that will be viable and there in the long term.

The new clause leaves an area of uncertainty. More precisely, we had the feeling that the introduction of the subsidy could not start before 2003, or at least it seems that it could not. Our amendment would oblige the Secretary of State to make an order under the section within three months of the commencement of the Act.

We ask just for an announcement. We do not necessarily expect such a scheme to start within three months of the commencement of the Act, but it is not unreasonable to look for an announcement, which could reassure people. No doubt an indication of the date would be part of it. I do not wish to labour the point, but that is very important because, unless people feel that something

[Mr. Cotter]

significant will happen, and unless something is done in good time, it will be a case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Mr. Letwin: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman believes that the confidence that he seeks to engender would be brought about if sub-postmasters believed that their future depended exclusively on subsidy.

Mr. Cotter: No, I do not, but we are saying that the Secretary of State should come forward with an announcement soon after the commencement of the Act because clarity would come from that. Other things would be coming forward, particularly the performance and innovation unit report; we are all waiting for that great thing to come from above. I hope that, when it does so, all sorts of other things will become apparent and reassure people, but we wait with bated breath to see what will come forward. I am bating my breath all the time, in fact.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) *rose—*

Mr. Cotter: I will bate my breath again and allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene.

Mr. Brady: What specific level of subsidy and what criteria for the application of that subsidy would the hon. Gentleman like to see in that announcement, which must be made within three months under his proposal?

Mr. Cotter: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has asked that question. It is precisely the question that I wish to ask the Secretary of State in a moment. We all await the answer with great hope.

I hope that, following my point about confidence, the Secretary of State will consider the matter very seriously. Sub-post offices are closing at the rate of about 500 per year, so we need something to stop that.

The Secretary of State could also acknowledge that—as has been said in so many debates—many sub-postmasters and mistresses are abandoning their sub-post offices because of their concerns about new technology. The matter of the pace at which new technology is introduced will have to be clarified. Many people with a certain age profile are very concerned about the introduction of new technology and feel that they should stop operating a sub-post office before they have to face up to that technology. As the Minister has said, high-tech training is needed. However, reassurances are also necessary.

Mr. Prior: Could the hon. Gentleman give us some idea of the size of subsidy that he and other Liberal Democrat Members would like to be provided to sub-post offices, given that their loss of income is predicted to be £400 million annually?

Mr. Cotter: That is a time-wasting question. Clearly, Liberal Democrat Members do not have information on the costs and nature of the problems. We cannot possibly answer that type of question. I am sure that Conservative Members could not answer that type of question. I could ask the hon. Gentleman the same question. Later in the debate, I might ask a Conservative Member whether he or she would like to come up with such a figure. The question is ridiculous. We are not in government, and therefore have no idea of the financial problem in terms of pounds, shillings and pence.

I shall not speak much longer, so that the Secretary of State will have bags of time to deal with the issue. Our time for this debate has already been eaten into. I am sure that all hon. Members are looking forward to learning from the Secretary of State whether a lump sum will be paid, at a specific time, to sub-post offices, or whether sub-post offices will receive a minimum income guarantee. If there is such a guarantee, for how many years will it operate? Is the subsidy intended to be a long-term solution, or only a short-term means of plugging a hole?

Hon. Members have mentioned the Postal Services Commission, the regulator and the consumer council. We should like to know whether the commission will be able to make an input into the subsidy. It will certainly have a significant job in identifying the requirements. We are worried not only that we shall not be told the figures today, but that the Treasury will, as usual, be left holding the purse strings.

Although it is all very well for Conservative Members to make soundbites about subsidy and encouraging people to run post offices, those are only soundbites. Conservative Members are in an extremely weak position on the issue, because they are proposing privatisation. They are on the back foot on the issue.

Mr. Page: The hon. Gentleman has stunned me into making an intervention. May I delicately point out to him that, with the exception of a few hundred Crown post offices, sub-post offices are already privately owned, and that it is a little difficult to privatise something that is already privately owned?

Mr. Cotter: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will recollect the proposals made, in 1994, by the previous Government, that the whole post office service should be divided into 11 regions—very much as the rail service has been divided, so that no division knows what the other divisions are doing. Sub-post offices could go just as branch lines went. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to address the issue later, when he tries to convince us that there is no problem with the Conservative party.

Today, we have to have some answers from the Secretary of State. I very much look forward to hearing what he has to say to provide a little more clarity and confidence, and to provide our sub-postmasters with a little more security for the future.

Mr. Lilley: I agree with the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) that new clause 1 is a major provision. The new clause changes the Bill's character and exposes the flaw in the Government's policy on sub-post offices. It should have been included in the original Bill. The need for it was foreseeable, and foreseen by many people, when the Government's policy on forcing people to have payments made through the banks was announced.

The failure to foresee that need and to make any precautionary moves was characteristic of this Secretary of State, whose head is always so deeply buried in the

sands of wishful thinking that he makes ostriches appear far seeing by comparison. We have a Secretary of State whose hallmark is not foreseeing the inevitable. He could not see that there was a possibility—for which he should have had contingency plans—that BMW might close Longbridge. Almost every car buyer in the country took that into account when they bought cars. I bought a Rover last October, and I was asked whether I had taken into account that Rovers might not be made in a year or two. I was patriotic enough to go ahead and buy one. However, I could foresee what might happen, even if the Secretary of State could not.

Likewise, everyone could foresee the need for subsidies if one took away the main revenue stream from post offices. I have told the House previously that, when I was Secretary of State, I was given advice that, if we were to make compulsory the payment of benefits through bank accounts, it would lead to the collapse of the post office network, and that the only way to prevent that collapse would be to introduce a subsidy for post offices. The only problem was that that subsidy would use up and absorb the bulk of the savings that one intended to make by introducing the policy.

Ministers have refused several times to confirm that they were given similar guidance, but I am sure that they were. Anyway, they have now tacitly admitted—by introducing the clause—the first two elements of that syllogism; that their steps to remove the DSS contract from post offices will put at risk the post office network, and that the only way to ensure that the network does not collapse is to introduce subsidies. Hence the power that the Government propose to take in the clause.

The tragedy is that the Government have not seen through the absurdity of their policy; namely that it will not save the money that they think it will. They should rethink their policy, start again from stage 1, and ensure the viability of the post office network by paying it to provide a service, rather than subsidising it to do other things than those that the Government require.

Mr. Letwin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that we anticipate, in the near future, some Secretary of State—possibly the present one—coming before the House to tell us about the subsidies that will need to be paid also to the banks?

Mr. Lilley: That is a good point to which I shall come in due course. The clause makes provision for such subsidies; rightly so, given the path upon which the Government have embarked.

The Opposition can at the very most give the clause a very reluctant and conditional welcome. We do not believe that the post office network ought to survive and exist on subsidy. We do not believe that it is necessary to embark upon a path that will make that essential. We agree with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, whose members do not want to live off subsidies—certainly not permanent ones, and preferably not even temporary ones—and want to restore a system where they are paid by the Government to deliver a service to the Government and to those whom the Government need to provide with benefits near the places where they live.

Mr. Gale: I wanted to intervene after my right hon. Friend's first sentence, but I thought that it would be discourteous so to do. I share his view that this clause is anathema in its content simply because we do not believe in subsidies. However, we are engaged in damage control, and it is not my job to make the case for the Liberal Democrats that they so signally failed to make for themselves. The new clause says not "shall" but "may", and states:

> The power to make a scheme . . . shall not be exercised without the consent of the Treasury.

First, the Secretary of State does not have to act. Secondly, the Treasury could say no. How does that help sub-post offices?

5.30 pm

Mr. Lilley: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point that leads me to ask how the Government got into this mess. As I have mentioned before, I have come across this issue in previous incarnations as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and as Secretary of State for Social Security. In this context, my experience as former Treasury Minister is even more valuable. As a Treasury Minister, I wanted to see savings made, but I learned in seven years at the Treasury—four as parliamentary private secretary to the Chancellor and three as a Treasury Minister—that the Treasury has a structural weakness. It is inherently prone to seek savings in one Department even though that may result in costs in another that more than offset the savings.

That approach is even adopted consciously and willingly and has been enshrined in a doctrine by a distinguished Treasury mandarin, Nick Monk. He said that the doctrine should be, "Take any savings from any source when possible." The Treasury does so, because even if there are offsetting costs in another Department, it hopes to be able to cap that spending or force that Department to find other savings to offset the extra costs in turn. That is a weakness of Treasury spending controls and I have always thought so. I thought so when I was a Treasury Minister and when I was Secretary of State for Social Security, which is why I resisted the proposals before us. The result of the policy of trying to make savings by eliminating the £400 million contract for the DSS to pay Post Office Counters Ltd. to deliver benefits through post offices would inevitably be a rise in the costs of the DTI as it introduced subsidies to uphold the post office network throughout the country.

The Treasury was able to proceed with that policy—and it has always eyed the possibility of a saving of £400 million and tried it out on previous Secretaries of State, including the predecessors of the present incumbents at both Departments—only because it had installed two fresh-faced, wet-behind-the-ears former Chief Secretaries to the Treasury as the Secretaries of State in the relevant Departments. It was a necessary precondition that the DSS and the DTI be in the hands of former Chief Secretaries who had not yet learned how their Departments interacted and how the consequence of savings in one would be increased costs in the other.

As soon as a problem emerged with the Horizon project, the Treasury seized the opportunity and told its old boys to go into action to clobber the contract with Post Office Counters Ltd. and impose payment of benefits through banks, as it had often wanted to do before. The problem with that policy is that it removes from the post office network a third of the income of sub-post offices.

[Mr. Lilley]

The underlying problem that the Government have is that, if they remove that income, they will render many sub-post offices—probably a third of the network—non-viable. Indeed, many sub-post offices receive more than half of their income from the DSS contract.

There are only two solutions to the problem. One is to provide alternative sources of revenue for the sub-post offices and the other is to provide a subsidy. Today, the Government are taking the first step towards subsidies. However, Ministers will have been given permission to introduce new clause 1 only with extreme reluctance on the part of the Treasury. It had hoped to get away without a subsidy clause and that is why it was not in the original Bill. The Secretary of State was forbidden from including a subsidy clause at that stage—if he even asked to do so—and it was only when uproar began to grow in the sub-post offices that he had to announce on Second Reading that he was considering introducing such a clause. He did not dare announce it before the two debates last week, for fear that those protesting would have realised that the new clause was permissive rather than prescriptive because it uses the word "may" rather than the word "shall".

Mr. Letwin: Is not another reason why the Secretary of State might not have wanted to present the new clause to the 2,000 sub-postmasters is that they want not subsidies but a viable future?

Mr. Lilley: My hon. Friend is right. That is central to the Opposition's case about the fallacy of what the Government are doing.

Initially, the Secretary of State would have met stalwart resistance from the Treasury, as I am sure he would confirm. The Treasury would have opposed the introduction of any power enabling the right hon. Gentleman to subsidise the post office network. It is almost certain that the right hon. Gentleman would have had to enter into an agreement with the Treasury that the proposal was being introduced only for cosmetic reasons, to placate the sub-postmasters, sub-postmistresses, pensioners, young mothers and disabled people who were frightened that the post office network would collapse without subsidy.

The Secretary of State is sniggering in a complacent and self-satisfied manner. I hope that the Government's freedom of information legislation will mean that we will be able to learn the terms of the agreement with the Treasury that has enabled him to introduce the new clause.

The right hon. Gentleman may be sniggering now because he thinks that the Freedom of Information Bill is also a cosmetic exercise and that he will not have to reveal the terms of that agreement. However, I rather think that he will. Advice to Ministers may be precluded from the Freedom of Information Bill, but agreements between Ministers are not. If he were candid, he could tell the House today the nature of his agreement with the Treasury—or at least whether such an agreement exists, even if it remains secret.

Mr. Letwin: If my right hon. Friend pursues this line of inquiry, is he not worried that the Secretary of State will bring forward further measures in another place to amend this Bill to prevent the Freedom of Information Bill applying to it?

Mr. Lilley: I would not put it past the Secretary of State to wish to do that, but I am confident that he would find the option outside the terms of the long title of the Bill. However, the Freedom of Information Bill has not completed its passage through the House and the Government may try and amend that instead.

Mr. Bercow: The clause is imprecise and does not specify the sums that would be available, or the circumstances in which they would be allocated. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that means that the Secretary of State has no defence on grounds of commercial confidentiality?

Mr. Lilley: I am certain that that is the case. It is alarming for Parliament to agree a clause such as new clause 1. It is open ended and not specific, yet it gives the Secretary of State enormous powers. The Secretary of State can delegate those powers to other people, of unknown provenance, and they enable money to be allocated in ways that we have no guarantee would be fair, equitable or above board.

I suspect that the Secretary of State has got away with all that because he has promised not to use the provision. Therefore, the House faces a dilemma. We do not want the clause to be exercised or subsidies used to support the post office network. The network should be paid for providing a service, not subsidised in lieu of that. However, the Government took the first false step and we need a mechanism for subsidising the network until a Conservative Government can get back in office and restore it in a more sensible and fundamental way.

Mr. Prior: If we were looking at a one-off, measurable change that reflected a change in technology, I could understand the argument for a subsidy of a given amount and for a given amount of time. However, as I understand it, we are looking at a permanent diminution of income, amounting to perhaps 50 per cent. of the revenue of a sub-post office. How can that possibly be rectified by anything in new clause 1?

Mr. Lilley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government have created a black hole and are now creating a rather circumscribed mechanism—conditional and tentative—for filling it up. As I shall show in due course, even if they filled up every cubic inch of that black hole, they would still leave the network in difficulties. If they replaced every penny of revenues that the post offices and sub-post offices currently receive from the Department of Social Security contract with a subsidy, the sub-post offices would still lack the necessary footfall—that is, the trade generated by pensioners, young mothers, disabled people and others who collect their benefit and spend a little of it in the sub-post offices, which thereby generates additional income over and above the fees paid by the DSS for the task of distributing its benefits.

The value of that trade must be significant. I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) will be discussing that issue. If so, I shall leave it to him.

Mr. Letwin *indicated assent.*

Mr. Lilley: As we do not want to hold up the House unnecessarily by repetition, I shall leave that interesting issue to my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) questioned whether it is a permanent black hole. The alternative to subsidy is other sources of revenue. If the post offices can generate alternative revenues to replace the DSS fee, they might be able to restore viability. The question is whether they can do that. Is it realistic to suppose that they will be able to generate enough revenues to replace a third of their income by 2003-05, when this calamity will hit them? I think that that is manifestly impossible, as doing so would require a rate of growth in other revenues that would be extraordinary and unprecedented, and the Government have given no indication of where it would come from.

The Government have indicated that they are going ahead with the truncated Horizon project, implying that that has the potential to generate massive revenues. When we originally introduced the Pathway-Horizon project to automate the delivery of benefits, we saw one of the virtues of computerising all the sub-post offices as enabling them to build on that computer link to deliver other services. However, we never imagined that that was more than a by-product. The Government have cut away the core, central purpose of the project—the delivery of benefits—and left the by-product on a stand-alone basis.

It is a very costly project—the Secretary of State's estimate is £800 million to £900 million; so not until it has generated £800 million or £900 million worth of revenues will it be able to contribute a penny to filling the black hole created by the absence of the DSS contract. When will that be? When will that project have repaid £800 million and started filling the black hole that is created by the removal of the DSS fee?

I asked the Minister for Competitiveness that question in last Wednesday's debate in Westminster Hall, but he did not answer it. Apparently, it is the tradition in Westminster Hall not to answer questions from other people. It is not supposed to be a controversial, adversarial place in which people ask difficult questions, and I was out of order in doing so. Perhaps he will answer the question today. When will that project generate a penny of extra revenues? Of course, the Government say, "We are subsidising part of the contract and £500 million will come from Treasury machinations and will not be expected to come from the Post Office." It will still have to come from the taxpayer, so it is an alternative form of subsidy. Only £400 million will have to be paid off by sub-post offices to pay for the contract. It is a funny business to enter into a scheme that is designed to save money and then conceal the fact that it will cost money by subsidising half of the scheme.

5.45 pm

In any event, the Horizon project so far is primarily an internal accounting and management tool for sub-post offices. The existing functionality is designed—doubtless it is useful—to improve the management of sub-post offices and to bring some centralised accounting and other functions to them. As yet, the functionality does not exist. It has not been written and it is not in place to engage in commercial business, particularly banking business, in which the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have asked us to put much faith.

Mr. Drew: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is talking historically. I have talked to Post Office Counters Ltd., and I understand that it has a pilot project up and running, which means that it can do business with the banks. The issue now is negotiating rates, which is to be expected, but it is important to get it on the record that the scheme is feasible.

Mr. Lilley: Indeed, mechanisms and relationships exist between the existing sub-post office network and the banks, but that is not through the Horizon project. The Government will go out to tender later this year to seek companies that are willing to write the software and to produce a package that will enable post offices to receive and transmit money automatically from the banks, and carry out the banking function of Lloyds, National Westminster, Barclays and HSBC. They will act as a local link, and basically fulfil the Secretary of State's pledge that everybody having by compulsion had his or her money paid into a bank account, can have it transmitted to the local post office, from which he or she can draw it out. That system is not yet up and running. Indeed, it is not even out to tender.

I visited a post office in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stroud before he temporarily became its Member of Parliament. The early stage Horizon project is operating there, and 300 other post offices a week are coming online. It is essentially performing an internal management function. For the record, it does so using a smart card rather than a swipe card. The original project was designed for smart cards rather than swipe cards, but that is an aside.

It is unlikely that Horizon will enable extra revenues to be generated in the time scale that is being forced upon it by the Government through the abolition during 2003-05 of the Post Office contract. Subsidy is inevitable if the Government are to protect and preserve a national network of sub-post offices. However, will the subsidy necessarily go to post offices? The new clause allows the Secretary of State to make by order a scheme

> for the making of payments for the purpose of assisting in the provision of public post offices . . . or assisting in the provision of services to be provided from public post offices.

That would enable the Government to subsidise the provision of banking services from sub-post offices, which would effectively subsidise the banks.

The Government propose to transfer the cost of distributing benefits from sub-post offices to banks. They have provided some misleading figures suggesting that it costs, on average, 49p per transaction to deliver a payment by the order book system through sub-post offices, but allegedly only 1p through the banks automated clearing system. The automated clearing system will charge the Government 1p for transmitting money from the Benefits Agency to a local bank. However, that is not the same as the cost of withdrawing money from a bank account or running a bank account. As I mentioned last week, the

[Mr. Lilley]

Government—at least, another Department of this unjoined-up Government—have helpfully issued a report on the competitiveness of the banking sector. Members who have read as far as page 283 will have found appendix D4—

Mr. Bercow: Hear, hear.

Mr. Lilley: My hon. Friend, like all my hon. Friends, has of course done so—*[Interruption.]* He has committed it to memory, as we may all be sure. Anyone who has read that far will know that the average cost of withdrawing money by cheque is £1.09 and that the average cost of drawing money from a hole-in-the-wall machine is more than 30p. The Government expect the banks to absorb the costs that will be incurred when people draw their benefits from the banks.

Banks, of course, will not bear the cost. Customers of banks always bear the costs of banks, and they, including benefit claimants, will do so. The Treasury proposes to transfer the costs from the taxpayer, who meets the costs of using the sub-post office system, to the customers of banks, who will meet the costs of using the banking system. Banks are not philanthropic organisations. They do not exist to deal with the problems of the general public, or even the problems of the Government—unless they are compelled to do so. Even if they are so compelled, they will be reluctant to take on people who represent an unremunerated cost.

If banks are unable to levy any charge on those who withdraw money from hole-in-the-wall machines or by cheque, they will be reluctant to accept as customers pensioners, disabled people and others who depend on benefit. The Government will be able to persuade the banks willingly to take on those people only if they are prepared to subsidise the banking system. When the Minister for Competitiveness winds up—*[Interruption.]* Apparently the Secretary of State will wind up: the big guns are before us, or at least the temporary pop guns.

In his wind-up, will the Secretary of State confirm that the new clause will permit subsidies that will effectively subsidise the banking system so that it may transmit money through sub-post offices? Only by that mechanism will the Government persuade the banks to take on such customers, let alone enable those customers subsequently to withdraw money from sub-post offices.

Mr. Letwin: May I press my right hon. Friend a little further on his ingenious exegesis of new clause 1(1)? Is he suggesting that it would give powers to the Secretary of State to make payments to the sub-post offices in order that they should make payments to the banks for the service of providing cash tills, or that the same route should be followed for the purpose of paying the banks for providing the connection so that sub-post offices may deliver money across the counter? Finally, is he suggesting that they might be able to make payments to the banks to subsidise them for taking on customers whom they do not want?

Mr. Lilley: My reading of subsection (1)(b) is that the Secretary of State is taking powers that will enable him to subsidise the provision of services provided from public post offices, but that he need not pay the subsidy direct to the post offices. He could subsidise the banks for providing that onward transmission to the sub-post offices. The new clause is phrased in a way that would allow him to do that, and it may be necessary for him to do so if the scheme is to be viable and he is not to end up with bankrupt post offices, with pensioners and others being refused bank accounts.

A whole array of questions remain unanswered about how the Government propose to deal with the problems of people who do not have, do not want or are not legally permitted to have bank accounts. That is a separate issue, and I appreciate that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would urge me to return to it on another day if I attempted to deal with it at length. I shall not try your patience. I have demonstrated that the Government have taken a route that may necessitate subsidising banks as well as directly subsidising sub-post offices.

What is the alternative to the mess that the Government are in? We could provide post offices with an income, not a subsidy. The Department of Social Security has always felt—rightly—that if the sub-post office did not exist, we would have to create it. The DSS, unlike banks, deals with people who are often immobile, who may not own cars and who cannot easily travel long distances to pick up their money. Those people want to be able to collect their money from a reasonably close outlet—namely, the sub-post office. Banks, by contrast, want people to be rich, have cars and be mobile. Banks expect people to go to a bank in town or use the internet or some other means. Hence, banks are closing branches.

Bank branches have always been fewer in number than the branch network of the Post Office. The sub-post office has been unique in dealing with the most vulnerable, immobile and often disabled people who need us to get money to them. That does not mean that we should not seek the most efficient and cost-effective ways of getting money to people. We must pay the sub-post office network to exist as an outlet in most of the parishes of this country, but if we can cut unnecessary costs in getting the money to the sub-post offices, we can make significant savings for the taxpayer.

As I recall, half the cost of the annual £400 million contract between the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. went on the latter's costs for warehousing, storing, printing and distributing order books, which are the most inefficient and insecure means of distributing money known to man. That is why we began a project to automate that element of delivery, so that money could go electronically to the post offices and be delivered to benefit recipients who would hold a benefit payment card. That would have cut out £140 million of fraud a year, which would have gone a long way to paying for the change.

That is a big task, but not unprecedentedly so. A similar project was successfully introduced in Ireland, which, for historic reasons, has a network of sub-post offices and a benefits system rather like ours. The people who introduced the system in Ireland were in fact contracted as part of the consortium to introduce it in the UK. Parts of the scheme are complicated, such as the so-called CAPS programme—the customer automatic payment system—that the Benefits Agency has been developing in-house. Although that was the most complicated part of the scheme, I am told that it is not what has gone wrong with it. Commercial add-ons are being retained.

Problems allegedly arose at some stage of the contract. It would be astonishing if that were not so. No major computer project anywhere in the world has not had problems of some sort. However, problems must be managed. It is the responsibility of Departments and, ultimately, of Ministers to sort them out: to simplify the system, if need be; to remove unnecessary complexities; and to deal with the apparent management quagmire that—rather than any technically insurmountable difficulties—lay at the heart of the matter. Ministers did not do that; indeed, they denied that there were any problems serious enough to delay the completion of the project by 2001. They told the House repeatedly that the project would be finished on time.

6 pm

The then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—doubtless he was sent to Ireland to find out how things really work—told the Select Committee that he was confident that the project would be satisfactorily completed. The Government were subsequently condemned by the Select Committee for being less than candid—a pretty damning criticism. Their defence was that it was commercially difficult for them to tell the truth. That might be described as the BMW defence, which, paradoxically, the present Secretary of State for Trade and Industry uses to excuse his predecessors for not having told the House the truth.

It would be interesting to hear from you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or from Madam Speaker, whether it is acceptable for Ministers to say that, in future, they will deceive the House if they believe that it would be commercially inconvenient not to do so. Will we be able to accuse Ministers of misleading the House, of telling lies, or of being less than candid for commercial reasons? After all, that is what they said they did and it is what the Select Committee accused them of doing.

Ministers should have sorted out the problems that arose, rather than pretending that they did not exist. They could have introduced a newer project to deal with the problems of automation so that the money got through to the sub-post offices and savings were made during the interim process, thus ensuring that we had a network of sub-post offices that were paid an income for performing a valuable social service—the provision of benefits in their communities to those people who cannot be expected to travel long distances to collect them.

Mr. Bercow: As the debate progresses, it seems increasingly clear that the new clause represents a bale-out for the Secretary of State, rather than support for the post office network. Given that point, does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful to know the exact nature and scope of the Treasury's day-to-day involvement with the proposed subsidy scheme, and in what circumstances it would be open to the Treasury to stop or restrict the application of the scheme?

Mr. Lilley: That would indeed be helpful. Of course, the new clause includes the bare-faced assertion that the Treasury has the right to prevent its implementation—there are no caveats in that provision. It would be interesting to know the modus operandi that was agreed between the Secretary of State and the Treasury.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stroud for endorsing the idea of a benefits payment card—a smart card to ensure the payment of benefits through a post office. I am glad that he supports the Opposition on that. I hope that he persuades Ministers to go back to that scheme.

Will the subsidy be worth while? We should subsidise sub-post offices only if the money is available and if the cost of the subsidy does not exceed the savings that were expected under the policy that made its introduction necessary in the first place. It is unlikely that the net savings—after giving the post office network enough subsidy to maintain it—will be significant; they could even disappear entirely.

Is the money available to make such subsidies? From the Prime Minister's response the other day, we got the impression that there is as much money as necessary to bale out the Government from the problems that they have created through their policy. In Westminster Hall last Wednesday, I asked the Minister whether those who were required to have their payments made through banks after 2003—pensioners and everybody else—would be subject to the same terms as those who currently volunteer to have such payments made through a bank. The payments are made monthly, four weeks in arrears.

The Minister looked distinctly fraught when I asked that question and he did not answer it. He was well aware that if millions of pensioners had to wait for four weeks to receive their pensions, instead of collecting it weekly, the poorer pensioners would experience a large gap in their cash flow. That is why the bulk of low-income pensioners, who depend primarily on the state pension, do not opt for payment through the bank, but collect their money weekly from a sub-post office.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): My constituents have pointed out that the forms are not clear. Because of their design, many elderly people do not realise that they have a choice—they think that once they have opted for the ACT system, there is no way back.

Mr. Lilley: When that point was put to the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, he said, in effect, that no one would be stupid enough voluntarily to opt for monthly payment by ACT through a bank, four weeks in advance, if they primarily depended on the basic pension. Some people may have been misled, as my hon. Friend suggested, but the Minister thinks that they are stupid if they take that course.

The Minister for Competitiveness did not answer my question last week; he obviously realised—as I could see from his expression—what a huge problem there would be if we suddenly required all pensioners to receive their payments monthly and up to a month late. There would be a gap of about four weeks when they would be without income.

When my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition raised the issue of post offices at Prime Minister's questions last week, the Prime Minister, who had clearly been alerted to the problem during the two hours between the Westminster Hall debate and Question Time, gratuitously blurted out that he wanted to make it clear that pensioners would be entitled to receive their benefits not just in cash from the post office, but weekly rather than monthly. A bit of policy had been made on the hoof; the Prime Minister committed the Government to making pensions payments weekly, rather than four-weekly in arrears. In future, people can receive those payments through the post office.

[Mr. Lilley]

I tabled a written question about what would happen if such weekly payments were extended to all the pensioners who currently have their pensions paid monthly, three or four weeks in arrears. The answer was that, by advancing everybody's payments by three weeks, there would a cashflow effect on the Treasury of £550 million. The Prime Minister has made a commitment that could cost the taxpayer up to £550 million in the year of its introduction—it would be a one-off cost, resulting from advancing the payments of those who, because they do not need continuity of payment, currently delay their payments and have them made monthly through a bank.

The actual amount would depend on how many people exercise that right; however, as it is an attractive one, we might assume that many people would choose it and that it would cost the Treasury a large amount. One has to wonder whether the Prime Minister had discussed that matter with the Secretary of State for Social Security during those two hours. Was he aware of the cost? When I tabled the question to the Department of Social Security, officials from the Department telephoned me to clarify the issue, so I had to explain to them how the system worked. They then confirmed in their answer that it would indeed cost £550 million. My estimate had been £600 million, but it was pretty close to the mark.

The Prime Minister, endeavouring to avoid a difficult headline, has committed the Treasury to paying up to £550 million in a one-off payment to get the Government out of a hole that they have created by a policy intended to save a couple of hundred million pounds a year at most. We have already heard how the Government have committed themselves to writing off £500 million of Post Office obligations to meet half the cost of the Horizon project. Therefore, a policy designed, notionally, to save money is already costing upwards of £1 billion before it has saved a penny, and before payment of any of the subsidies introduced by today's measure.

The policy is a disaster—a disaster that was waiting to happen. It has happened because two newly arrived former Treasury Ministers did the Treasury's bidding without working out what the implications were for their Departments—the Department of Social Security and the Department of Trade and Industry. Now, the only way that the Government can bail themselves out is to introduce an open-ended subsidy by means of the new clause.

We need some answers from Ministers today. Is that subsidy intended to be permanent or temporary? Will it be discretionary or automatic if, as a result of post offices closures, the access criteria are not fulfilled? Will the subsidy be to banks or just to post offices? Will it be a large subsidy—and, if so, how large—or small and insignificant? Above all, will it be sufficient to keep the post office network alive and vibrant, or will it be insufficient to do more than to slow its inevitable collapse, which the Government set in train when they announced that people would have to have their benefits paid, in the first instance, direct into bank accounts?

I hope that the Government will think again about the need for the new clause.

Mr. Mike Wood (Batley and Spen): I may not speak as briefly as did the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), but I shall speak in support of the new clause, because I accept that the automated credit transfer proposals will place under threat the core work of many sub-post offices. It seems to me that the Government are right to proceed with their plans, as, to coin a phrase, doing nothing is not an option. If the experience of the previous Government does not show that, nothing does.

The Conservatives said that they would not vote against the new clause but then spoke for a considerable time, and with considerable force, about its failings. They seem to forget that in 18 years, while Conservative Governments did nothing, thousands of sub-post offices went out of business. Therefore, doing nothing is not an option, and in the face of that history—in the face of the continuing closures of sub-post offices—it would not be sensible for the Government to retreat from this plan. Extra uncertainty will help nobody—certainly not sub-post offices in my area.

The Horizon project—to be completed by next spring, in spite of what the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said—will open up new areas of business potential for sub-post offices. Of course there is a cost, but no one could argue that it will not open up that potential.

We look to the tripartite working party set up by the Government with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters and the Post Office to find new work for sub-post offices—not just to re-arrange what is already there, or to make available to sub-post offices the work that is currently available only to Crown post offices. The potential of the network is woefully under-used. Surely, with the will of all the parties, extra work can be found.

6.15 pm

If we are to talk about subsidy for the community benefits of post offices and the community contribution that they make, the subsidy will need to be considerable. In my area, at least, many sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses spend much of their time on the wrong side of the counter, as it were, helping pensioners with problems not directly related to their business, reading things for them because their eyesight is not terribly good, and taking people on one side when they have problems. If we suggest that there should be a subsidy to compensate for that dimension of the work, the subsidy will undoubtedly be considerable.

I stress to Ministers the scale of the threat that ACT can pose to sub-post offices, not only in rural areas and inner cities, but in areas such as my constituency, which is neither rural nor in an inner city. At least two of the 25 post offices there depend on the payment of benefits over the counter for more than 75 per cent. of their work. As always, averages hide the full extent of the story, but almost all the business of some post offices—not only rural or inner city ones—comes from the payment of benefits over the counter.

Therefore I hope that in his final remarks, the Secretary of State will give two assurances to postmasters and postmistresses such as those that I have mentioned, not only in my constituency but throughout the country, whose business depends on the payment of benefits.

First, I hope that my right hon. Friend will give an assurance that any subsidy offered by the Government to cover the transitional period as ACT is bedded in will not

be restricted to rural offices or to those in inner cities, but will apply throughout the country, and that offices will be treated on a case-by-case basis. Secondly, I hope that he will assure us that if all the efforts of all concerned, not just in the tripartite group but throughout the industry, to find alternative sources of income have not been successful by any objective criteria by, let us say, the end of 2001, consideration will be given to postponing the introduction of ACT until enough progress has been made to ensure that the changes, inevitable though they are, will not be introduced until we are sure that they will strengthen the post office network.

If the Secretary of State gave those two assurances at this stage, there would be a collective sigh of relief throughout the network, and there would be much greater willingness to work with the Government to revitalise the sub-post office network, which has for so long been lamentably ignored and left out of proper consideration. If he does so, we shall be well placed to push the changes through.

Mr. Baldry: I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate, as I was one of just four Conservative Members who sat on the Standing Committee considering the Bill.

First, may I say how sorry I am that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) is not here today. He led for the Opposition in Committee and did an excellent job, being vigorous in cross-examining Ministers on the Bill's shortcomings. It is a cause for great sadness that he is today in hospital with, I understand, a ruptured appendix. Indeed, he appears literally to have bust a gut in his opposition to this measure.

The debate may well take a little time, not least because there is absolutely no reason why the new clause should not have come before the Standing Committee. The Secretary of State today seems to have introduced an interesting new constitutional convention: if Ministers are particularly interested in a new clause they do not have it discussed by the Standing Committee, but reserve it for Report and Third Reading. That undermines the whole purpose of Standing Committees, which is to scrutinise, rationally and deliberatively, measures brought forward by the Government, doing so line by line and clause by clause.

On the face of it, the Secretary of State is today telling the House "We always intended to bring forward this clause. We deliberately did not put it before the Standing Committee, because we thought it should be scrutinised by the House as a whole." The House as a whole will not have known that, but I question whether that is the truth and accords with the facts.

As one of those who sat on the Standing Committee, I know that much of the Committee's time was taken up with the concern about maintaining the integrity of the post office network in general and sub-post offices in particular. I suspect that during that time we visited practically every post office in my constituency, and the post offices in the constituencies of other hon. Members. I understand that the Minister himself was dispatched by his private office to visit rural post offices in north Wales.

At no time during the Committee's deliberations did the Minister tell us "Don't worry chaps. There is no problem. We shall sort it out, and come Report and Third Reading we have a wizard wheeze: we shall come up with a new clause which will provide for a subsidy, so you can curtail these discussions." I for one would have been very grateful for that, because as well as being one of only four Conservative Members on the Committee, I was one of only three Conservative Members on the Trade and Industry Select Committee. The records of the House will show that on many days I was in both places at the same time, often on the Select Committee having to cross-examine the Secretary of State and others about their total incompetence in handling the Rover fiasco. So I would have been very grateful if we could have short-circuited proceedings in the Standing Committee.

If the Minister for Competitiveness—for that is his title—could have told us "Much of this discussion can be curtailed, because we shall bring forward a new clause on Report", I suspect that many of us would have said that we would look at it, and the Standing Committee procedures could have been much shorter, but we never had a scintilla of a hint of that.

Moreover, the Minister for Competitiveness—because he clearly recognised that he was under considerable pressure from colleagues on his own side of the House, like the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood), who urged him to consider delaying the introduction of automated credit transfer—decided to send out a "Dear Colleague" letter. We all know "Dear Colleague" letters; they are letters that Ministers send to every hon. Member, so that they cannot be accused of being partial, but they are really meant to give succour to their own Back Benchers and be sent to constituents who are raising problems. We had one today on pensions. It included charts, and I was surprised that it even included a video programme, on what the Government were supposedly doing for pensioners.

We had a "Dear Colleague" letter on the Post Office network. There was not a scintilla of a shadow of a suggestion of a subsidy in the letter and not even a hint that the Government might table a new clause on Report. Indeed, the Minister said:

> The Government has put its money where its mouth is.

That is not a term I would use as a Minister, but this is new Labour, new jargon. There was not a whisper or a hint of a subsidy.

That must cause the House to consider the vigour with which the Government are advancing the new clause today. Having heard the Secretary of State, one must have more than a suspicion that what really happened was this. Ministers hoped that they could brazen it all out, that by the time the Bill went through Committee the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses would have been bought off, and that the Minister for Competitiveness could visit sufficient sub-post offices throughout the country and reassure them that there was no problem. But, of course, the Government could not do that, because the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses knew that there was a problem, and they would not let up. What is more, customers of sub-post offices around the country were determined that their voice would be heard.

In every village in my constituency, and I am sure in all the constituencies of my right hon. and hon. Friends, people signed petitions. The petition of 3 million that was delivered to Downing street last week was but the tip of an iceberg, only part of all the petitions that had been signed. Many were produced through local newspapers

[Mr. Baldry]

and regional newspapers, such as the *Western Morning News*. I suspect that huge numbers of people signed petitions.

I am sure that if we could see the minutes of Cabinet meetings held a couple of weeks ago, we would find that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry presented a paper to his Cabinet colleagues explaining that they were in some difficulty, that they were coming up to Report and Third Reading and that there was about to be a substantial lobby of Parliament by sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses. What was more, local elections were coming up. In the local elections on 4 May the Labour party will defend many district council seats in rural areas and other parts of the country. I am sure that the Secretary of State is conscious that it is not particularly popular at present.

So the Secretary of State prevailed upon his Cabinet colleagues to allow him to table a new clause. I have no doubt that minutes went between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Treasury, with the Treasury saying "Of course, you can do that, provided it makes no commitment whatsoever and makes it absolutely clear that no subsidy will be introduced without express Treasury permission."

When one looks at what the Secretary of State said last week in response to the lobby by sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, one sees that his line to begin with was very robust:

> Next week we will table a new clause to the Postal Services Bill when it is debated on Report. It will enable me to set up a financial scheme to ensure that essential services can still be delivered through a nationwide network of local post offices. Our key target is a viable future for the network. We want to ensure that the Bill covers all possibilities.

I pause there. Clearly there seems to be a recognition of the fact that what the Government are doing in the Bill may well mean that unless they take some action there will not be a nationwide network of local post offices.

The Secretary of State then said "It may"—that is the crucial word—

> well be that in future, because of changes that are being introduced, financial assistance should be offered to the network.—[*Official Report*, 12 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 385.]

There is no guarantee from this clause that anything at all will happen as a consequence. There is no guarantee that the Treasury will put its hands in its pockets to the extent of one penny as a consequence of this new clause. It may well be that all that we are seeing in this debate is an almighty con of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, who may think that as a consequence of the new clause there will be a rescue—some help—offered to them, but who in reality will discover that none whatsoever is forthcoming.

We support the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters in its desire for income, not subsidies, for sub-post offices. The clause is needed only because the Government are proceeding with their disastrous policy of switching to ACT, which threatens the survival of thousands of sub-post offices across Britain. Of course, the NFSP is not unaware of the fact that the new clause offers sub-postmasters no guarantee in the future. At the very best, it may offer them only an unspecified subsidy.

6.30 pm

Colin Baker, the federation's general secretary, yesterday said:

> sub-postmasters want to have a commercial living in viable and vibrant post offices. The prospect of existing on a subsidy therefore will not be a very pleasant one for them . . . We would say the answer to the network is investment, not subsidy allowing us time to get through this difficult period and out the other end. As they say, give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, give him a fishing rod and teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.

Several colleagues have made the point that sub-postmasters want some certainty. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) made the pertinent point that sub-post offices are private businesses and that those who run them need to have an idea of what lies ahead. The Government's new clause gives them absolutely no idea of what will happen in the future, and the Secretary of State has provided no figures on the extent of the subsidy or the conditions under which it might be introduced. To whom will the subsidy be paid, how will it be paid and in what circumstances will it be paid? Will it be paid to all post offices, will it be paid on the basis of transactions or will it be paid to some post offices when they fall below a certain threshold? There has not been a scintilla of substance in anything that the Secretary of State has said on any of those matters.

Neither has the Secretary of State provided any vision of how he sees the post office network developing. That is a pity. If he had simply read *The Guardian* the other day, he would have seen sound advice in an editorial. It observed:

> Rural post offices must be kept open. They are the arteries of country living and of the rural economy. It is very sad that the government has only been forced into devising a strategy for survival because it failed to see the obvious consequences of its decision to pay benefits directly into bank accounts instead of over PO counters by 2003. Many sub-post offices rely on money from this source for 40 per cent. of their incomes. But at least the government is at last thinking about a long-term solution, under pressure from public opinion, including this week's 3,000 strong demonstration of sub-postmasters in London and the outcry against Barclays' decision to close outlying branches. This problem will not be solved by leaving it to market forces. Companies and banks will not rush in to fill the rural gap because the profits are simply not there. Nor can a single post office do much because it is only one spoke in a solution that must involve the underlying strength of post offices: the fact that they are a network and there are 19,000 of them. The seeds of survival are waiting to be planted.

The Secretary of State has given no clues about the long-term survival prospects of post offices. He has merely said that if certain unspecified conditions arise, he may introduce an unspecified and unknown subsidy to help some unspecified and unknown post offices in the future. We did not hear in Committee and have not heard in this debate any suggestion of how the Government might turn around their mindset and stop thinking of sub-post offices as part of an old economy. In fact, they can be part of the infrastructure of a new economy.

We are moving increasingly into the age of the internet and of online shopping and communication. When that happens, goods will still have to be delivered. Vibrant post offices are ideal collection points and new technology can do much to assist the rural post office network. One hopes that the Government will turn their mind to thinking positively about how we can enhance the post office network rather than closing it.

We must not forget just how essential sub-post offices are to the life of England as a whole. I suspect that my constituency is not unusual, because practically every

parish council in it has written to me expressing concerns about the Government's proposals. I shall share with the House the thoughts of some parish councils on their concerns about the threat to the rural post office network.

Bodicote parish council says:

We believe that the loss of this business is likely to have a deleterious effect on smaller Post Offices, particularly in local areas and may well threaten their livelihood. We believe that closure of these smaller Post Offices would in turn have a retrograde effect on local communities . . . Our Post Office currently stocks a range of basic items; this is the only place in our village where such things can be bought—the alternative is to travel to the supermarket in the next town.

We believe our local Post Office plays a vital role in the local community, not least as the only focal point in our village apart from public houses. We wish to urge the Government to make a commitment to maintain the existing network.

Middleton Stoney parish council says that it is concerned

at the potentially adverse effect on rural post offices of the proposed changeover to payment of benefits by ACT. Many rural post offices depend on the revenue from such payments and there can be little doubt that such a change would cause many such post offices to fail.

At a time when the banks are intent on closing branches, the concurrent loss of rural post offices would cause considerable hardship, particularly to the more elderly rural population who are often ill served by public transport. Many could face a situation where they have no local access to either post office or bank.

New clause 1 refers to a scheme, but clearly not all sub-post offices will be affected in the same way. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen expressed disquiet about the Government's proposals and said that there were at least two post offices in his constituency where more than 75 per cent. of their business comes from paying benefits and making other social security payments. Such post offices will be hit early by the changeover to ACT. When the Secretary of State responds, will he tell us whether any scheme that the Government intend to introduce will be graded so that it responds to the sub-post offices that run into difficulties earlier than the others? Alternatively, will the Government seek national coverage and wait until the position nationally gets desperate? That will inevitably mean that a few sub-post offices will go to the wall before the Government have introduced any scheme if, indeed, they genuinely intend to do so.

The users of sub-post offices are, by definition, often the most vulnerable in our community. As Milcombe parish council says, the proposal envisaged by the Government

will hit the most vulnerable members of the community, i.e. senior citizens, those on benefits, single/young parents unable to travel, disabled, those without their own vehicles living in villages without public transport. The majority of these people do not have bank accounts and have no access to the nearest town. Remember also that banks in rural areas have also been closed down.

Mr. Holloway, the sub-postmaster at Steeple Aston, sent me a cogent letter summing up the views of all of those postmasters involved:

The nearest bank to our village is twelve miles distance and with limited public transport, banks are largely unavailable to a large section of our community. Most of these people are elderly, disabled, poor or disadvantaged in other ways and rely on their local Post Office and village shop. Modern technology is beyond them and of little help.

He continues:

if we lose the Post Office or if the income generated from it is greatly reduced, the viability of the shop comes into question. Secondly, if people go into town to obtain their money, costing them nearly £3.00 return bus fare, or for the luckier few, a similar amount for petrol and parking, then they will shop in town (while they wait several hours for the return bus) again, affecting the income of the shop.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) made a telling point about that. The general footfall of business resulting from the fact that post offices presently pay benefits is crucial to many businesses. Post offices want customers, not subsidies, and if customers stop coming for whatever reason, they will lose the post office business and the business of the village shop.

Mr. Holloway says:

If we lose the Post Office, it is more than likely that the shop will be forced to close. If that happens the heart of the village will be lost. Steeple Aston is "still" a village community. The shop supports most of the activities, by acting as the ticket office for many events, a collection point for information on activities, advertises events and activities and promotes many clubs and village organisations.

The shop also acts as a meeting point, many villagers meet at the shop, by arrangement, or largely by chance, which helps them keep in touch. Many of the older villagers find it an important social focal point, without it they will be largely isolated.

We keep a look out for the old and infirm, if someone fails to come to the shop, we arrange for a neighbour to call and check on them. We also act for the Health Centre (a couple of villages away) by handling the issue of repeat prescriptions, for people on regular medication, if the prescriptions are not collected, we can again check on the well being of the recipient.

It is difficult to put a value on these services, but without them the quality of life in our village will be greatly reduced.

The huge number of people throughout the country who have signed petitions makes it clear that the people of the United Kingdom have no doubt about the value of post offices and sub-post offices in villages as well as in towns and on the edge of towns.

We could accept—or at least have greater confidence in—the Government's commitment to maintaining the integrity of the post office network if the Secretary of State was not quite so opaque. The new clause is not a simple amendment, but contains a number of subsections and paragraphs, ending with a damning conclusion that nothing will happen without the express permission of the Treasury.

Under those circumstances, no one can have any confidence that any money will be forthcoming. Whatever acronyms are used for sorting out the public spending round, such as DELs—or even Delboys—nothing will happen unless the Department of Trade and Industry makes a bid for funds from the Treasury. The Secretary of State has made no commitment today that might demonstrate that he is prepared to do even that. Indeed, as *Hansard* will show, remarks do not contain a single sentence that might give the House an indication of the precedent conditions on which such a scheme may be introduced. There has been no indication whether a scheme will be introduced based on the number of post offices being closed or the viability of failing post offices.

Imagine someone coming to one of our constituency surgeries on Friday or Saturday saying, "You were in the House and heard the Secretary of State first-hand. I am running a village post office and want to know whether I should sell it or invest to expand. Can you explain the circumstances in which I might be entitled to a subsidy to run my business?"

None of us in such a position would be any the wiser, as the Secretary of State has given the House no information giving us confidence that money for any

[Mr. Baldry]

particular sub-post office would be forthcoming, and he has not mentioned the terms or circumstances of such a grant.

6.45 pm

Of course, the fact that we have got this far is greatly to the credit of people throughout the country, including many Members of Parliament, parish councils, post offices and communities involved in the campaign to save village post offices. At the last moment, the Government have been willing to make a nominal concession, even though they were not prepared to make any concessions in Committee. The Secretary of State in his reply must give the House better guarantees than he did when opening the debate, and reassure us that the subsidy will be genuinely forthcoming and is not simply a sop to get the Bill through Report and Third Reading or, more significantly, to get the Government through the haemorrhaging of Labour support in the local government elections on 4 May.

The Government Whip, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) may laugh, but like my colleagues, I have spent the greater part of the past two weeks knocking on doors in my constituency. When one has been a Member of Parliament for as long as I have, one has walked the streets many times before. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that he need not look forward to waking up on 5 May.

Announcing a subsidy would be pitiful if it were simply a sop to get the Labour party through a massive loss of seats in local elections in rural areas on 5 May. On the other hand, it could be a genuine attempt to address what the Government now accept as a real problem resulting from the introduction of automated credit transfer, which would undermine the long-term viability of the rural post office network. The Secretary of State owes it to the House and the rural post office network to give Parliament and the country much more information about how the new clause will operate than he has done so far.

Of course, had the new clause been introduced in Standing Committee—as it should have been—we could have spent some time cross-examining the Secretary of State or the Minister for Competitiveness; we could have tabled parliamentary questions and fleshed matters out. Introducing what the Secretary of State himself admits is one of the most important clauses in the Bill on Report is a discourtesy to the House—although that is neither here nor there—and, much more importantly, avoids proper scrutiny, giving the impression that the new clause is not a matter of substance, but a sop. By such means, the Government hope to convince people that they are doing something for rural post offices when, in truth, they have little intention of doing anything to protect the integrity of the rural post office network.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) has just pointed out, the debate has exposed the fact that new clause 1 is of no value in addressing the problem. Whether it is con or sop, it fails to make explicit specific sums of money, periods of time or circumstances, and therefore will not help a retiring sub-postmaster sell his post office and will make no difference to his position. I hope that the Government are not deliberately intending to mislead the public and sub-postmasters in presenting the new clause purely as a piece of window-dressing. Whether or not that is their intention, the new clause does not solve the problem.

The whole House, I believe, thinks it essential for post offices to develop new business corridors. Recently, I had a long conversation with a sub-postmaster in my constituency, who spoke enthusiastically about Horizon and how he would sell people tickets for theatres, travel and so on. The closure of branches by clearing banks provides a great opportunity for the post office network to do the grassroots job of banks and to pick up banking business. I shall focus on the latter point. Sub-post offices are a network in the banking business, serving the underprivileged community whom the Government like to call the socially excluded. Massive effort has been expended by the Government in focusing on the socially excluded and the fact that they do not have banking services; we have also heard lots of humbug, talk and waffle about credit unions.

The network of sub-post offices is the ideal network to provide banking services for the socially excluded. Its banking business should be supported, and the proposed version of ACT should not be introduced. I have a vision of the post office network of the future providing banking services to people who currently do not have them, in the more depressed areas of Liverpool and other rundown cities. The future of the sub-post office is not just a rural issue but an urban one.

A huge opportunity is being lost, and I urge the Government to think again and to postpone the introduction of ACT. They should plug in their social exclusion unit, which is advising them that the 20 per cent. of the community who do not have bank accounts should have them. Those people will not get accounts from the clearing banks, which are closing their branches. The Government should work with sub-postmasters—that splendid body of self-employed small business men—under the umbrella of what is in essence a public sector body. They are just the job to provide what is missing in banking services for our community.

Why waste the time of the House? Why try to mislead postmasters with the empty promise of new clause 1, which will not stop the collapse of the sub-post office network? It is at best honestly intended, and at worst purely a con, but it will not make post offices saleable when postmasters retire. The Government must think again, delay ACT and think constructively about how the sub-post office network can be rebuilt in the future.

Mr. Prior: At the beginning of the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) described new clause 1 as the Corporal Jones clause. That was an accurate description. The new clause has been forced on the Government at short notice in response to 3 million names on a petition, pressure from the Opposition, the forthcoming local elections, and a realisation that the introduction of ACT would have a dramatic impact on many thousands of sub-post offices around the country.

This evening we have heard that up to 75 per cent. of the income of a sub-post office can come from the payment of benefits and pensions. In my constituency, the level of income from that activity can be well over 50 per cent. It can be a great deal more when one takes into account the footfall impact if there is a village shop alongside or within the post office.

The most objectionable aspect of new clause 1 is the thought behind it—the assumption that commercial activity can be replaced by Government handouts. It is assumed that the entrepreneurs—the decent men and women who run sub-post offices—will be happy with handouts from the Government on an entirely discretionary basis.

Mr. Letwin: Was it not remarkable that when we asked the Secretary of State whether he intended a temporary subvention to enable viability on a commercial basis thereafter, or a permanent discretionary subvention, he produced what can best be described as extremely elegant waffle?

Mr. Prior: My hon. Friend is too kind. It was cosmetic flannel. The new clause is designed as a sop, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) said, to enable the Government to get through a few difficult weeks. It will become increasingly apparent to sub-postmasters and mistresses as time goes by that, under the new clause, they will be exchanging a commercial business and an income stream for which they have worked diligently over many years for handouts from the Government. No one who has been in receipt of handouts from the Government will consider that a reasonable swap.

I do not believe that the savings of £400 million a year identified by the Treasury will be realised. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) said, there is a maxim in the Treasury that savings in one Department must take into account the extra costs in another. It is clear from new clause 1 that there will be costs in other Departments to offset those savings.

Post offices will not be able to replace the loss of income with Government subsidies, and the post office network will be increasingly vulnerable. The new clause is wholly unsatisfactory, a fact that the Opposition view with a great deal of suspicion. As time goes by, sub-postmasters and mistresses across the country will realise that they have been sold a pup by the Government. I hope that the Government will think again carefully about delaying for a long time the introduction of ACT.

Mr. Brady: I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak briefly in the debate on new clause 1, especially as I want to flag up the importance of the sub-post office network, not just in rural areas, which have been alluded to at length, but—

Mr. David Jamieson (Lord Commissioner to the Treasury) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Brady: I see that I have some support from someone on the Government Front Bench, for which I am grateful. As I was about to say, the network is also important in urban and suburban areas.

Mr. John M. Taylor: On the point that my hon. Friend is developing—the assumption that we are speaking of a rural problem, whereas in fact it is an urban problem—will he speculate whether those who do not have a bank account and are unlikely to have one are predominantly in rural or urban areas?

Mr. Brady: I suspect that they are in both but that there is a large concentration of those people, whom the Government sometimes choose to refer to as the socially excluded, in the urban areas and in suburban areas. In parts of my constituency, some fairly large council estates at present have the benefit of some local shops and post offices, which are being placed under threat by the Government. I am sure that that is the case also for many Labour Members. There is widespread concern that the facilities that are currently available for people in those circumstances may be removed.

Mr. Letwin: Will my hon. Friend allow me to say that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) who is, alas, unable to be in his place, but who is the chairman of the all-party group of which I am the secretary, specifically asked me to mention in the House that he believes that it would be a disaster if measures were taken exclusively for the rural areas, because as my hon. Friend said, it is classically in the urban areas where a great part of the problem lies?

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, and for the opportunity to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who speaks a great deal of sense on many matters, and who shares my determination to defend the excellent grammar schools that we have in some parts of the north-west—another issue on which I have considerable sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Member for Weston–super–Mare (Mr. Cotter) paid a rather bizarre compliment to the Secretary of State, by suggesting that he had been both open and opaque in his presentation. Presumably that was intended to be at least half a compliment, but the only translation that I could come up with was that the hon. Gentleman was accusing the Secretary of State of being transparently evasive in what he is doing.

Mr. Taylor: Would it not be more appropriate to say that the right hon. Gentleman was incandescently obscure?

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. No doubt the creativity of our hon. Friends could produce many other variants.

New clause 1 provides no certainty whatever. It sets out no ground rules for determining whether there should be a subsidy, when there should be one, or how it should be applied. Important issues arise for sub-post offices in urban and suburban areas, where the market circumstances may be rather different from those of isolated rural sub-post offices. There are conceivably many instances when a town, village or community in an urban or suburban setting might have more than one post office. It is quite possible that both, or all, those post offices would be threatened, because they might all depend heavily on the income that they currently derive from the payment of pensions and other benefits.

7 pm

New clause 1 contains no criteria or ground rules suggesting how the Government would conclude whether one, both or all the post offices in question would be supported. Presumably, if their principal objective is to preserve a community service, the logic can extend only to support for one post office, because that would achieve the aim of securing the service on whose protection they wish to spend public money; but how are they to decide the way in which the subsidy is granted? Should they divide it between the post offices in an attempt to protect them all, and in so doing perhaps risk losing them all? The Secretary of State has been utterly opaque, and I can only assume that he has been deliberately opaque.

Mr. Swayne: May I suggest a reason for that opacity? Last Wednesday most Labour Members had a very disagreeable day. Anyone who was downstairs in the canteen and saw them buying tea for their constituents in order to salve their consciences will realise that new clause 1 is an emergency measure tabled by the Secretary of State to deal with the consequences of that disagreeable day, and that its lack of clarity results from the fact that none of it has been thought out.

Mr. Brady: I am always delighted to hear that members of the public have received some benefit from their Labour representatives. Even if it only runs to a cup of tea, that is a considerable improvement on what might otherwise be on offer—although, in this instance, the cup of tea seems inadequate compensation for the loss of a vital public service.

I hope that when he responds the Minister will put some flesh on the bones of new clause 1 by informing us of at least some of the criteria that are intended to apply to the distribution of subsidy to the post office sector as a whole, and to the distinction between different types of post office. I assume that the Secretary of State hopes to retain the public service benefit; what "map" has he in mind, in terms of the density, or distribution, of sub-post offices? What would the Government regard as the minimum requirement? How far does the Secretary of State think it reasonable for a pensioner or recipient of other benefit—perhaps a disabled person—to have to travel? What travelling time does he consider appropriate?

As in other contexts, some Members may be more concerned with the interests of large rural areas. As only a small part of my constituency is rural, I tend to turn my mind to the suburbs. It may take a person living in a suburb or city just as long to travel to a sub-post office as it takes someone in a rural area to traverse what is, in absolute terms, a greater distance. I should like to hear what criteria the Secretary of State would consider necessary to trigger, or justify, subsidy in such circumstances.

Mr. Bercow: I am sorry to pursue my hobby-horse again, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital in terms of confidence for us to have information confirming that the criteria are specific and precise and lend themselves readily to objective assessment, so that we can be assured that decisions will not be made—either by the Secretary of State or by his agents—according to arbitrary fiat or political preference?

Mr. Brady: I entirely agree. It is important both for steps to be taken to ensure that the subsidy—if there is any—is distributed fairly, and for a clear rubric to be set out explaining how it will be distributed and in what circumstances. Sub-post offices and those who depend on them must have some guarantee that new clause 1 will actually deliver.

The fairness and clarity called for by my hon. Friend are particularly important in view of the disproportionate effect that the proposals may have on certain social and demographic groups. According to recent newspaper reports, the Labour party has now decided that it has no intention of targeting the elderly, because it does not think they are likely to vote Labour in the future.

Mr. Bercow: And it thinks that they are all racists.

Mr. Brady: Indeed.

Admittedly, I hope that most people who have achieved a certain age will have the wisdom not to vote for the Labour party; but given that Labour has said in internal strategy documents that it has no intention of appealing to the pensioner vote, we are forced to ask again what exactly is the purpose of new clause 1.

If any substance were given to the new clause—if the Government acted to protect sub-post offices—many pensioners would benefit. As my hon. Friend suggested, it would be entirely wrong for the funds, if there are any, to be distributed according to party advantage. That surely would not happen under the present Government, but I venture to make another suggestion.

The new clause was introduced at a late stage. It is a panic measure, tabled in response to a large petition, a lobby of Parliament and the sudden realisation that this was a matter of great public concern. Given that the whole project was conceived as a response to obvious public dissatisfaction and worry about the closure of post offices, we must be left with the suspicion that if the new clause is adopted, and if the Treasury ever agrees to provide funds to back it up, what decisions are made may well depend on who is prepared to shout loudest and make the biggest row about the possible loss of post office services in their communities.

Let me now say something about the concern caused by the Government's general policy of moving towards a subsidised system of provision.

Mr. Bercow: Before my hon. Friend embarks on his new point—which I await with beads of sweat on my brow, and with eager anticipation—let me ask him this. Does he agree that, in view of the Secretary of State's opacity, and the uncertainty about the final form of the scheme, it is important that the regulations—subject to the affirmative procedure—should also be subject to a minimum consultation period of three months?

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend makes a wise point. I was not, of course, going to comment on the beads of sweat that are apparent on his brow. It is indeed important that there should be proper consultation and an appropriate period for consideration of the detail of any proposals that the Secretary of State may present at some point in the future. Those who have a legitimate interest or anxiety, whether they run sub-post offices or depend on their services, should be able to express their views before the affirmative resolution procedure is implemented. We can hope for a truly fair, clear and reasonable system only if that happens.

Even if all those criteria are fulfilled, we are left in an unfortunate position. The Secretary of State claims that his objective is to encourage greater commercialisation of the Post Office and greater entrepreneurship in sub-post offices, yet all his actions and proposals will achieve the opposite. Far from encouraging entrepreneurship or persuading sub-post offices to explore methods of maximising their income by providing services, the Secretary of State will lead them to dependence on public subsidy. By following that unfortunate path, he may achieve the reverse of his intentions, discourage entrepreneurial endeavour and proper commercial activity in sub-post offices and push them towards a model of employment status, or even the status of a nationalised service.

It is bizarre that some Liberal Democrat and some Labour Members have tried to link the new clause with privatising the Royal Mail. That argument is entirely bogus because, as my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) pointed out, sub-post offices are already predominantly in the private sector. New clause 1 is far from being a proposal for privatisation of post office services; indeed, it is a proposal for the potential nationalisation of part of the network.

New clause 1 would discourage entrepreneurial activity, commercialisation of the network and the independent small businesses that have served communities so well for many years. I repeat the caveat that we do not know whether new clause 1 will be accepted. However, if it is to have substance and revenue to support it, or if it is to be effected meaningfully, it will encourage a state, nationalised post office service. If that happens, the fears of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) will be realised. We are considering a planned economy and the ability of Ministers and their officials to decide how to provide services by determining the number of post offices, their location and the sort of communities they should serve.

The problem is of the Government's making. The Government have put in train changes in the payment system for pensions and benefits that will cost the sub-post offices an enormous sum. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) said, the Government's proposals do not have the benefit of a saving to the Exchequer. The tabling of new clause 1 is an admission that an administrative development, which will cause real suffering and difficulty for many people, has no true financial benefit.

7.15 pm

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): That is modernisation.

Mr. Brady: People are beginning to understand that modernisation sometimes causes genuine problems. It damages their communities and the provision of public services. It may be an attractive buzz word for those on the Treasury Bench, but it means nothing and provides no benefits for ordinary people.

I hope that the Secretary of State will make some concrete commitments. If he stands by new clause 1 and has genuinely acted in good faith by tabling it to try to rectify some of the problems that the Government are creating for sub-post offices, we need to know how its provisions will be implemented.

What are the financial implications? We want to know not only the cost but how the subsidy will be distributed between different sub-post offices, and on what criteria. Will the subsidy go to rural, suburban or urban areas? What priority will be given to ensuring that the elderly have their post office services protected? What priority will be given to ensuring the provision of sufficient post office services in areas of deprivation, or places with large populations, which depend on benefit payments through post offices? We can have confidence in new clause 1 and the Secretary of State's good faith in trying to save post offices from Government attack only if he can provide concrete assurances and make genuine commitments this evening.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I want to explore the key word of the debate—opacity—in the context of new clause 1, and link it to a potent point that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) made. He pointed out that, through accident or incompetence—it does not matter which at this stage—we are in an invidious position. We have been presented with a comprehensive new clause—which, according to the Secretary of State, forms the core of the Bill—not in Committee, where it could be properly scrutinised and amended, but on Report when there is an element of time pressure. That speaks volumes for the way in which the Government go about their business. Their actions, taken in a panic and at the last minute, are ill thought out and poorly understood—and that applies to the Secretary of State's actions, let alone to those of anyone else. In the limited time available, we must attempt to discover from the Secretary of State what lies behind the new clause.

New clause 1 is shot through with incongruity and phrases that mean little if anything to me. We want to ascertain whether they mean anything to the Secretary of State. Our old friends "may" and "shall" are the subject of other amendments in the group. The new clause would provide that the Secretary of State "may", if he sees fit, implement its provisions. It contains no guarantee for the sub-post office network. We are therefore considering a discretionary matter. The provisions may or may not be effected, depending on the whim of the Secretary of State of the day. The current Secretary of State's successor may be in place more quickly than even he can imagine. Does he feel that he can commit his successors to such a provision?

The use of the word "may" is significant. I hope that the Secretary of State can reassure us and the sub-post office network that "may" will be replaced with "shall". That will at least make clear the intention of new clause 1, and show that the provision is not discretionary. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will comment on that when he winds up.

Difficulties arise with paragraphs (a) and (b) of subsection (1). They make an interesting distinction between

assisting in the provision of public post offices

and

assisting in the provision of services to be provided from public post offices . . .

On the face of it, that may seem to make the most comprehensive provision of all. If that is the intention, it deserves our limited support. However, subsection (1)

[Mr. Eric Forth]

could contain an important distinction that may cause much confusion and uncertainty as to whether the Secretary of State truly intends to assist

in the provision of public post offices . . .

Does that not imply the possibility of new sub-post offices being provided, were they to be deemed necessary?

We want to know about that because until now, the process has been seen as one of irreversible decline. If the Secretary of State can tell us that there may be circumstances in which a new sub-post office could be brought into being by the provision, some rural areas in particular might take encouragement from it. That needs to be clarified.

There is also doubt about who would implement the proposal as the new clause provides that that may be done either by the Secretary of State or by someone else on his behalf. That is an important distinction. Were it to be the Secretary of State and were he prepared to give undertakings to the House now, that, too, might be somewhat reassuring, but if we were told that he at least had in mind the possibility that some other person or agency would deliver the mechanisms—the new clause would allow that—we would already be at one remove from what has been said during these proceedings. Whatever reassurance he may be able to give us, how could he guarantee that his agent or agency, or any other person acting on his behalf, would have the same commitment to doing what we have been told would be done? That is always supposing that we get some commitment from him; we have had none yet.

The new clause appears to describe the scheme in detail, but it turns out that that is not the case at all. The scheme

shall specify . . . the descriptions of payments . . .

which is fair enough, and

the descriptions of persons to whom such payments may be made . . .

We can all imagine that they would be sub-postmasters or someone of that kind. It shall also specify

the person by whom such payments may be made . . .

which refers back to the possibility that that may be someone other than the Secretary of State—but we then come to the matter of criteria, which has already been touched on in this short debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made a plea in an intervention. He said that to be meaningful, the criteria should be clear, concise and well understood. One can see what he means. However, he will recall that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury pointed out in his excellent contribution that in many ways, sub-post offices perform a social service in their community and often provide support, advice and help to their customers. How could one express that in the criteria to which the "person" would have regard in deciding whether payments had to be made? The matter seems straightforward on one level. However, on another, if the Secretary of State ever accepts that sub-post offices have a crucial social and community function to perform, how will he factor that into the criteria so that payments will be made under the scheme? These matters are not trivial; they are of the greatest importance.

If we were told that the Secretary of State had no intention of paying any regard to social matters, that would give rise to suspicion that what appears, on the face of it, to be a comprehensive scheme was cobbled together late in the day without sufficient thought. No one—least of all, regrettably, our excellent sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses up and down the country—should imagine that the proposal is the solution to their problems. Would that it were otherwise. If we had had a proper chance to examine the new clause, we might have been able to make more progress in that regard.

Subsection (5)(a) refers to "conditions as to repayment". That strikes me as an important and potentially sinister provision. For the first time, there is a reference to repayment being made, which clearly implies that it is in the Secretary of State's mind that any moneys paid to sub-post offices under the new clause may have to be repaid in some circumstances. We must know an awful lot more about what "repayment" means before we can give our approval to the new clause. It could mean any number of different things, and repayment could take many different forms. We need to know what "conditions as to repayment" could mean before we can feel reassured by the new clause.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend is very experienced in these matters and he is right to smell a rat. Is not his suspicion reinforced when he reads subsection (6), about which there has been considerable commentary? It refers to the requirement for

the consent of the Treasury.

Does not it appear that the Chancellor has agreed to the proposal only on the basis that it might never happen? If it does, the cost will be recouped, as usual, in the old stealthy Labour way.

Mr. Forth: That, of course, suggests itself not only to my hon. Friend, but to most of us who have taken even a brief moment to study the new clause. I shall come to subsection (6), but time is pressing and I do not want to delay the House unnecessarily. I simply say that we have all spotted the Treasury's grubby hand on the throat of the new clause—it cannot be concealed. We need to know what the Secretary of State thinks his relationship with the Chancellor is, what guarantees he has or has not received from the Chancellor, and whether he thinks that the payments that he envisages being made will be both adequate and guaranteed. If they will be neither, the measure is worthless.

Mr. John M. Taylor: Is not the proper interpretation of our constitutional affairs that a Government are collectively responsible? There are no separate Ministers in that sense; all are part of an entity. Is it not therefore curious and extremely offensive that one part of the Government has to seek the permission of another?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend, who has enormous experience of those matters, knows that what he says is literally true, but I fear that the entity that matters in this regard is that referred to in subsection (6)—Her Majesty's Treasury and the Chancellor. We need to hear a lot more from the Secretary of State about his relationship with the Chancellor, with specific reference to what the Secretary of State will no doubt claim are the reassurances in the new clause.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Forth: I give way for the last time.

Mr. Bercow: Does not my right hon. Friend agree that it is important, not least for the self-respect of the House, that we should be assured that we are not debating the matter in a vacuum? Would it not therefore be helpful to know whether the details of the scheme and the extent of the Treasury veto over them have already been determined, but, for political convenience, will be rolled out later, or whether the Government simply have not got round to thinking them out at all?

Mr. Forth: That remains to be seen. The debate may or may not be taking place in a vacuum, but our great fear is that the new clause is vacuous.

Mr. Brady: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: Yes, but then I must conclude.

Mr. Brady: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. Does he agree that it would be more convenient for the House, and that a lot of difficulties in the Government would be avoided, if the power to make the decision were given straight to the Treasury instead of the Secretary of State? We could cut out the middle man.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend has stumbled on an important answer. Subsection (3) refers to "another person"; obviously, that is the Chancellor. We may not need an answer from the Secretary of State; my hon. Friend has given it to us, which is very helpful.

My final question to the Secretary of State relates to subsection (5)(c), which contains a typically opaque reference to

> the modification of the functions of a body established by an enactment . . .

What on earth can that mean? Either it means nothing at all—the parliamentary draftsman must have been suffering from his now customary flu—or it is a sinister provision, the meaning of which has been completely, cleverly and subtly hidden by the parliamentary draftsman and sanctioned by the Secretary of State. We need to know what it means.

The new clause will not do, unless the Secretary of State is prepared and able to give detailed, specific and reassuring explanations and guarantees that it contains much more than any of us has hitherto been able to identify.

7.30 pm

Mr. Letwin: I find myself in the unusual position of joining my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on an unaccustomed Front-Bench team. It is all the more unusual because I have a certain fellow feeling for the Minister for Competitiveness—in the past little while, we have both spent a large part of our waking hours thinking about post offices. The difference between us is that I dream about them, whereas I suspect that he wakes up having had nightmares about them.

New clause 1 has been introduced by the Secretary of State with all the appearance of a matter of settled policy. It would be fine if it were. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) eloquently mentioned, all hon. Members on both sides of the House attach huge importance—I do not exempt the Minister—to the post office and sub-post office network. That is common ground. If the new clause were an example of a clear-minded and settled policy to deal rationally with the future of our sub-post office network, we would all be happier.

What has come out in this debate often comes out in debates, even on Report, and I share the sentiments of many of my hon. Friends in decrying the fact that the new clause has been introduced only on Report: there is a great lack of clarity of purpose. As my hon. Friends the Members for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) and for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) pointed out, when the Secretary of State was pressed and pressed again to state whether the new clause is a single, simple measure to enable sub-post offices to do what I think we all want them to do—invest in the technology that will give them a viable future alongside ACT—or whether the measure will permit the continued subsidisation of sub-post offices as a substitute for a viable future, the Secretary of State refused point blank to answer the question in a fashion that would have satisfied the House.

I suspect that the Secretary of State refused to answer for the reason to which many of my hon. Friends have drawn attention, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth): because the new clause is not a matter of settled policy. It is something that the Secretary of State introduced at a late hour to solve the problem of having to face 18,000 birthday cards, 2,000 sub-postmasters and 3 million signatures. That is not the way in which to conduct public policy on any matter, let alone a matter that is as important to the nation as the maintenance of the sub-post office network.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) pointed out, many of us predicted months ago that introducing ACT without a proper pause for reflection and without taking time to introduce alongside it the proper technology, which would enable sub-post offices to engage in activities that keep their footfall and revenues aloft, would result in subsidies. When I first mentioned that in the House, the Secretary of State looked as if someone had said something that was rather impolite. Apparently, it was far from his thoughts that he would end up spending the money that the Secretary of State for Social Security was ostensibly saving but, some months later, what do we have? We have a new clause with the vaguest and widest possible permissive powers to administer subsidies and to make up for some unknown deficiency, through the administration of an unknown quantity of grant. Our predictions were wholly fulfilled.

The ingenious interpretation of subsection (1) by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, which showed that, at least on a prima facie reading, the new clause could be used to subsidise banks as well as sub-post offices, points us in the direction of something that, either by the means in the new clause or by other means, we will in due course see. The Government will need not only to keep the sub-post offices alive, but to subsidise the banks.

[Mr. Letwin]

From the beginning of the saga, the Department of Social Security never properly considered whether the banks could willingly take on as customers a very large number of people currently in receipt of benefit and pension. That deficiency will have to be paid for through taxpayers' money. If the Secretary of State thinks that that is an impolite thing to say, I challenge him to come back and to admit to the House, in due course, when he or another of his colleagues introduces a positive proposal to subsidise the banks, that we were right, just as our predictions earlier that sub-post offices would need to be subsidised have proved to be right.

What do we have here? We have what is becoming a familiar and important theme of the Government. First, action is taken which, although not necessarily ill-intentioned, is ill-thought through. Secondly, a major industry or service is adversely affected. Thirdly, a Government who came to power telling us that they had learned the lessons of free market economics engage in solving, or in attempting—usually unsuccessfully—to solve, the problem through increased subsidy. We have seen it in agriculture, in the car industry and in the coal industry; now we see it in sub-post offices. It is a lamentable rhythm, but it is beginning to become extremely familiar.

In the case of sub-post offices, it is highly ironic because the only reason for the adverse effect on sub-post offices is that the Secretary of State for Social Security thought that he was going to please his former master, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, by saving £400 million. That £400 million is an extremely mysterious entity. No one knows how much of it is due to payments that go to the sub-post offices, how much is due to payments that go to Post Office Counters and how much is absorbed in internal administration. However, let me take a guess that, at present, at least half of it goes to sub-post offices by one means or another.

Let us imagine that everyone who would come in to collect a benefit or a pension—who, in that case, will not spend, on the Secretary of State's figures, roughly 50p of taxpayers' money on having that benefit or pension available for collection at the post office—is also not going to spend at least as much again in gross profit contribution: he or she is not going to buy things in the post office. I do not know whether that is the right or the wrong number. The Secretary of State undoubtedly knows, but he has long since forsworn any effort to tell us.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said, we need to know the answer. Let me speculate that the answer that I have given is approximately correct: £200 million will be directly lost by the sub-post offices, and about another £200 million will be lost through lack of customers. What, then, would the subsidy need to be wholly to replace that lost revenue? Amusingly, it would be £400 million. That is why we believe that, if the Secretary of State is continuously to re-subsidise the post offices to the point that they were at before the Secretary of State for Social Security began his attack on them, he will need to spend about £400 million a year of taxpayers' money.

The Secretary of State has not said so. He has not said a word about how much he will spend. He has not said whether it will be a large or small amount, but we are justified in assuming that the cost of the injudicious measures of the Secretary of State for Social Security will be enormous.

During the debate, two problems have emerged in relation to that enormous sum of money. First—my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West made the point clearly—when subsidies are administered on a continuing basis, they create subsidy dependence. They divert the attention of the business man—in this case, the sub-postmaster or postmistress—from running the business and towards maximising subsidy.

That is a danger to the sub-post office and to any industry that suffers from it. It is a danger about which we thought the Government had learned because, before they came to power, they preached the virtues of a market that was not subsidised. However, it turns out that, when it comes to sub-post offices, the Government's knee-jerk reaction is to create the very subsidy dependence that we all suffered from for so long and so deleteriously.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk said eloquently, another reason why we should worry about continuing subsidy is that the subsidies themselves are vulnerable. As many of my hon. Friends pointed out, the new clause is permissive. It will go on being permissive because subsidies are never given as a matter of contract. Governments always, under all regimes, take great care to ensure that no one can ever claim a subsidy as a right. Therefore, subsidies are necessarily tenuous.

In the terms of new clause 1, the subsidy is described as "a scheme". It is indeed a scheme. It is a scheme to avoid a principal problem, and it is a scheme that could be as quickly undone as it has been established. Every sub-postmaster the length and breadth of the country will know that. Consequently, they will know that they are constantly under the threat of the subsidy being removed. Therefore, their attention will be focused in the wrong place, and their livings will be precarious. That is in no way a satisfactory result for sub-post offices; nor is it the result that they have been seeking. Sub-post offices have been seeking long-term commercial viability—not a subsidised or precarious existence, but a well-founded existence.

There is, however, a way. That is why Opposition Members have not been arguing against new clause 1, but have merely been drawing attention—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst did notably—to its drafting deficiencies.

Mr. Alan Johnson: Where is he?

Mr. Letwin: I am sorry that my right hon. Friend has departed the Chamber, but he lent much eloquence to us when he was here. He certainly drew attention to the lack of drafting. We have complained about that, and about many other matters.

We do not wish, however, utterly to oppose the new clause because it contains a better possibility—the germ of a decent idea. Rather than a continuing subsidy, there should be a pause—a delay and a reflection. In that time, the Secretary of State could use the powers provided in the new clause and by other means to install in sub-post offices proper technology, parallel—although perhaps different in character—to that which my right hon. Friend

the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden tried to install when he was Secretary of State, but which the new Government disrupted.

Mr. Johnson: No.

Mr. Letwin: Yes, the Government did disrupt it. I know that the Minister thinks that they did not, but he has forgotten that the previous Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was very clear in his statements that the project would be delivered, after which it was cancelled. I do not know why it was cancelled. I am sure that it was not Ministers' fault, and that they did not go round to destroy the computer. However, the fact is that, under this Administration, that project failed. It had not failed before. It did not seem to be failing, but when it did fail, the future of sub-post offices was put under threat.

There is now a chance that, if the Secretary of State uses new clause 1 not in the wrong way but in the right way—not to go on subsidising post offices permanently, but to inject, once for all, sufficient funds to provide them with the technology to enable them to go on providing benefits and many other services—post offices will keep their footfall and, therefore, their financial viability. If the new clause is used in that way, of course we would welcome it.

It is a sorry thing, however, when a Secretary of State—who is perhaps one of the more intelligent members of the Government—comes to the House with a new clause that is ostensibly derived from public policy and not merely a sticking plaster to deal with a political problem, but cannot answer the fundamental question: "Is this something that you intend to use as a means of permanently and unsatisfactorily subsidising sub-post offices into a gentle oblivion? Or is it a bold manoeuvre to try to give them, once for all, the modern technology that they need?" Why cannot he answer the question? He cannot answer because he has not decided.

In the past few weeks, to my certain knowledge, Ministers have had no fewer than six occasions in the House on which to announce their answer, and six times they have failed to announce it. That is why the new clause has been drafted in a manner that is—as many of my hon. Friends have said, using a polite word—opaque.

Mr. Bercow: Risible.

Mr. Letwin: Perhaps. However, the new clause's problem is not its opacity of drafting, but that the mind behind it is intentionally opaque because it has not yet been made up. It is a mind unmade. That is no way in which to introduce legislation.

I hope that, as a consequences of this debate, Ministers will go back to that dreadful place that they are forced to inhabit, think to themselves a little harder, and be able—perhaps in their Lordships' House—to include provisions in the new clause that tell us whether it is a devastating and disastrous piece of permanent subsidy or a perfectly sensible move to do what we have all been asking for for many months now.

Mr. Byers: This has been a debate of some interest, and I shall try to address the issues raised in it by right. hon. and hon. Members. It is worth reinforcing the point now, however, that new clause 1 simply gives the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry the power to establish a scheme. The new clause is not about the details of that scheme or the form that it might take. It is purely about including in the Postal Services Bill a power for the Secretary of State to establish a scheme.

7.45 pm

I can understand the concerns that hon. Members have expressed about the details—such as whether the scheme will be temporary, whether it will be operated by means of a lump sum, and whether it will be a continuing obligation. The House will be able to consider all those details. New clause 1 makes it clear that the matter will be dealt with by the affirmative process. Therefore, there will be a debate, and there can be a vote on the scheme when it is introduced by the Secretary of State—if there is a decision to introduce such a scheme.

As I have consistently made clear, the provision is permissive; it is a matter of "may", not "shall". It is permissive because we do not know what the future will bring. I hope that the Postal Services Bill will receive Royal Assent and be on the statute book for many years. As I said on 12 April, when speaking on the issue, it is right that we should have a safeguard in the Bill providing the Secretary of State with a power to introduce a scheme. That is exactly what new clause 1 does.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood) raised the issue of whether the scheme could be tailored, dealing with post offices individually. Yes, it can. I think that the scheme will be able to do that, so that there will be some flexibility and some targeting of support. However—to reassure the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow)—it will not be adapted, evolved or produced in a way that is politically partisan in any particular form. It will be based on the support that needs to be given to individual post offices, either for a post office itself as an entity, or for the continuation of certain services offered by a particular post office that the Government wish to support.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) raised the issue of repayment. I appreciate the concerns that he expressed on the issue, and it is a shame that he has not stayed to hear me try to answer his questions. Nevertheless, I shall try to reply to the relevant points that he raised. As he missed my opening speech, he missed some of the reasons that I gave for the new clause. He then asked questions about some of those reasons. However, he did raise the important issue of repayment. Other hon. Members, too, may be concerned about the circumstances in which repayment of a subsidy or financial support may be appropriate. The matter should be considered very much within the context of provision of services.

Many of us hope, looking forward to a vision of post offices in the future, that post offices will offer services that go way beyond the services that they currently offer. Although more diverse services may be offered, some of those services may be offered at a loss to sub-post offices. I think that most people would say that, in those circumstances, if they are services that the Government wish to support, and if they are offered on behalf of the Government, it is appropriate for the Government to make a financial contribution towards the cost of offering them. Therefore, effectively a contract will be reached between the Government and the individual post office.

[Mr. Byers]

I believe that "subsidy" is a pretty poor description of that arrangement, as it is not a subsidy, but payment given for a service offered by the sub-post office. Because of the way in which the parliamentary draftsman has arranged the clause, the arrangement is called a subsidy. However, we will be paying for a service that the individual post office can offer.

If we pay for that service, but for some reason the service is not offered—if there is effectively a breach of the contract—repayment would be appropriate, as the Government would not be receiving the service that we paid for. In those circumstances, a power to seek repayment of the subsidy is an appropriate one for the Secretary of State to have.

Mr. Bercow: I understand the scenario that the Secretary of State has just depicted, and his explanation is helpful. However, under the regulations, could a sub-post office face a demand for repayment if it were granted a subsidy for one service, but made a modest profit on another service? Would the Treasury use the profit on the latter service as justification for demanding repayment of the subsidy paid for the former service?

Mr. Byers: We are talking about support for a particular service, and the arrangement would involve the finance coming from the Government to provide that service. Provided that that service is delivered, the sub-post office will have delivered on its side of the agreement, and there will be no question of money being clawed back because of a profit that the post office may be making somewhere else. That is why new clause 1 makes the distinction between the entity of a post office as opposed to a particular service that the Government may wish to offer financial support towards.

Mr. Brady: Is the Secretary of State guaranteeing that the measure will in no circumstances be used to allow this to be a loans scheme, under which payments would be expected to be repaid?

Mr. Byers: I am pleased to be able to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that nothing in new clause 1 would lead to that outcome.

On the matter of Treasury consent, whether hon. Members feel comfortable with it or not, we all know how government works. Individual Departments do not have their own budgets, and government works because of funds provided by the Treasury. There are many examples of legislation passed by this Government, and by the previous Government, where Treasury consent has been required before a particular scheme has been funded. That is not unique—it is a common arrangement.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) referred to a continuing subsidy for the network. Clearly, he is unaware of the way in which the post office network operates, as there is effectively a subsidy at the moment. Rural post offices get up to eight times as much as urban post offices per transaction from the Post Office. There is a recycling of finance within the network at present and, effectively, many rural post offices are subsidised in this way.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we do not want post offices to rely heavily on subsidies for the services that they offer. That is why it is important to ensure that people do not automatically assume that the power within the new clause will be implemented for every single post office. Hopefully, we are talking about exceptional circumstances. We want to use the new Horizon project and the diverse range of services that can be offered following the computerisation of the network to allow new customers to come into the post office network.

We want the network to diversify into new Government services, so that problems over footfall can be addressed by the new customers. If we can get that diversity, any loss as a result of the introduction of ACT can be more than accommodated in terms of the new customers using the post office network.

As a result of the Government's commitment that any individual pensioner or benefit recipient who still wants to have his or her pension or benefit paid in cash at a post office will be able to do so, a lot of the scare stories about a large loss of customers should come to nought. Post offices will be able to convince pensioners or benefit recipients that they should remain as they are and continue to have their cash paid at the post office.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) said that, last year, there had been about 500 closures. That is not the case. There were fewer than 400 closures last year, and that is not the highest number that we have seen. In 1984-85, 389 sub-post offices closed. The number of closures last year was below that figure.

Mr. Cotter: The Secretary of State may be correct, but there were 392 closures in the first nine months of this year, with the expectation that there would be about 500 for the year. The right hon. Gentleman can correct me if I am wrong.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. The figure for 1999-2000 is 383. The way in which the figures are calculated is that we have the figures for last year, which will be updated. However, it is incumbent on all of us not to talk the post office network down. There are many thriving small businesses in the post office network, and they should be congratulated. It is important that people do not get an overall view that the post office network in total is experiencing difficulties, although I accept that some sub-post offices are.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) asked whether the power in new clause 1 allows the Government to subsidise banks. It does not. It allows for services to be subsidised, provided that they would benefit public post offices. It is worth reminding the House that many banks are already providing customers with access to their accounts through the post office network. The Alliance and Leicester, Lloyds TSB, the Co-operative Bank and Barclays provide access to their accounts through the post office network, and do so without any financial support. The Post Office is in fact making a profit from those schemes.

Mr. Letwin: Will the new clause allow the Secretary of State to subsidise a bank for providing a service through a post office?

Mr. Byers: It will allow the Government to support a service, provided that it benefits the Post Office. That is

clear. It may be that the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden was not as clear as he could have been—some might say that he was opaque—in talking about a subsidy to the banks. New clause 1 does not give the Secretary of State that power. We are providing subsidy support for a service that will be of benefit to the Post Office.

The principle is so important. Many post offices will welcome the fact that the Government, with foresight, are providing in the Bill a power for the Secretary of State to establish a scheme that can provide a subsidy. No one wants the post office network to rely on subsidies coming in year after year, but there will be occasions when the needs of a community will require the Government to make a financial contribution and to give support. New clause 1 gives that power to the Secretary of State.

The new clause is highly appropriate, and will be welcomed by postmasters and postmistresses up and down the country. It is not a replacement for new services—Horizon and computerisation will provide that, and we are spending £500 million to achieve that objective. Diversity into new Government services will bring new customers into the post office network. If need be, there should be a scheme in place to provide a subsidy. New clause 1 does precisely that, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

8 pm

New Clause 2

RECOVERY OF COSTS OF THE COUNCIL ETC.

'. The Secretary of State may give directions to the Commission as to—

(a) the inclusion in any licence of conditions requiring the payment of sums relating to the expenses of the Council or of the Secretary of State in relation to the establishment of the Council,

(b) the exercise of any power of the Commission to determine anything falling to be determined under such conditions.'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Alan Johnson: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 35, 45 and 48.

Mr. Johnson: We turn to more prosaic matters. New clause 2 will enable the Secretary of State to require the Postal Services Commission to include a condition in any licence that part of the annual fee will be for the expenses of the Consumer Council for Postal Services—the replacement for the Post Office Users National Council—or the start-up costs in relation to that body. New clause 2 will also enable the Secretary of State to direct the commission on any matter that falls to be determined under such a licence condition.

It is now judged as proper that those being regulated should pay for all aspects of regulation, including the costs of the consumer body. It would not be sensible to give the consumer council its own licensing and fee-raising powers. It is more efficient for a single body to collect all the necessary funds and to pay over the money required for the consumer council.

The establishment of the council will cause the Secretary of State to incur start-up costs above those normally associated with supervising the consumer council—which are budgeted for in the normal way—and it is appropriate that some, at least, of these should be recovered.

Government amendments Nos. 35, 45 and 48 are technical amendments that provide that the Postal Services Commission will have its own vote, like any other non-ministerial Government department. That will put it on a similar footing with the other utility regulators, and the amendments will, I hope, address the concerns raised in Committee by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan)—to whom we send our best wishes for a speedy recovery, although perhaps not speedy enough to participate in this Report stage—with regard to the provisions in schedule 1(12) for the Secretary of State to pay the expenses of the commission.

Government amendment No. 35 will delete clause 43(6), which would be otiose in the wake of Government amendment No. 45. There is no need for the provision for the commission to recover expenses from the Secretary of State, because the commission will, as a non-ministerial Government department, have its own vote. Funding of activities and any transfers between departments will be dealt with as with any other Government expenditure. Government amendment No. 45 provides that there shall be paid out of money provided by Parliament any expenditure incurred by the commission in consequence of this legislation. Government amendment No. 48 will delete schedule 1(12), because those provisions are no longer required, given the proposal effected through Government amendment No. 45.

Before I commend these technical amendments to the House, it might be helpful if I remind right hon. and hon. Members of our intention that the cost of operating a licensing regime, and the regulation of that regime, will be met through licence fees. Any expenses of the commission that were not related to those activities will need to be covered through moneys voted by Parliament.

Mr. Page: I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) for his guest appearance at the Dispatch Box, as I was not allowed to wind up the previous debate for the Opposition. The Minister, if I may say so, sounds dreadful. It is obvious that the curse of the Postal Services Bill has struck him, although not as severely as it has struck my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan). I hope that the Minister is restored to health soon and is a little more sympathetic to some of our amendments when they re-emerge in the other place.

I am not able to welcome new clause 2 with even the cautious optimism that I expressed on new clause 1. The Bill already makes provision in clauses 12 and 13 for those applying for licences to the commission to be subject to paying a reasonable fee upon application and to pay further sums when a licence is granted or during its operation, or indeed both. Unfortunately, it is still not clear what level of payments may be anticipated under those arrangements. Now licence holders face the prospect of paying towards the costs incurred by the Consumer Council for Postal Services or the expenses of the Secretary of State in establishing the council.

[Mr. Page]

The truth is that the costs of the council will eventually be borne by consumers of postal services, but the Government prefer to disguise the impact of their regulatory requirements behind the payments to be made by licence holders. In the short term, it will be the poor old Royal Mail that will have to divvy up and provide the money to underpin financially the whole shooting match.

As the Minister has said, new clause 2 provides that the Secretary of State may give direction to the commission as to the inclusion of conditions in a licence requiring the payment of sums relating to the expenses of the council or incurred in setting up the council. Once again, we are being asked for a blank cheque. It might not be all that big a blank cheque, but we have already been asked to approve the money resolution today, and we have no idea what sums of money will be involved.

Neither do we know how much money will be involved under new clause 1. My hon. Friends pointed out on several occasions during the debate on that clause, which took some four hours—an indication of the level of concern and worry that they were feeling—that it was open ended and they would like some clue about the likely liabilities. However, we had no pointers from the Government. The same applies here, although at a lower level, and when we tried to get some limits set for both the commission and the council in Committee, we were brutally beaten down by the massed ranks of the Government.

What safeguards will exist to limit expenditure? Will we see a similar situation to that of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, which was formed following the merger of the Office of Gas Supply and the Office of Electricity Regulation? It bears repetition that Ofgem's budget has leaped from the £29.8 million spent by the predecessor authorities to an expected expenditure this year of £64.5 million, which is an increase of more than 100 per cent. As we keep saying, the extra expenditure will eventually feed its way through to the consumer—and it could turn out to be merely for extra bureaucracy. Once again, the Secretary of State will pull the strings and, as the costs work through the system, the extra money will have to found by the consumer.

Mr. Johnson: I thank the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) for his sympathy for my voice: if it does not last out, I shall complete this speech in semaphore.

In Committee, the hon. Gentleman made great play about the level of payments. The point that I made then, I shall repeat now. Yes, it will be what he called "poor old Royal Mail" or the Post Office that will have to pay the cost of the regulator and of the CCPS. That is because the Post Office is likely to be—in fact, it is inconceivable that it will not be—the only licence holder.

The principle that the regulated pay for the regulation is well established. Indeed, it was established in the Electricity Act 1989, the Water Industries Act 1991 and the Gas Act 1986, as amended by the Gas Act 1995, all of which legislation was passed under the previous Government. I ask the hon. Gentleman to bear in mind that, unlike all those other industries, the Post Office will operate in a privileged position because it will have a limited monopoly. The regulator will not regulate the whole of the industry, as in telecommunications, gas and water, but only that part of the postal industry related to the universal service obligation and the reserved areas. It is right that those costs should be paid by the Post Office or any other licensed operator in the future.

I shall try to be helpful on costs. I have not had time to consult the *Hansard* reports of the Committee stage, but I did give some figures under the considerable hostile pressure of the Opposition. I have said that the cost of the commission is expected to be no more than £5 million and the cost of the consumer council is expected to be around £3 million. That is an increase on the cost of the present consumer body, the Post Office Users National Council, which costs about £1 million a year. However, although POUNC does a fine job on a shoestring, the new Consumer Council for Postal Services will invigorate the approach to consumer issues.

The arrangements are no different from those in place for the other regulatory bodies. We have given examples of the costs, and I remind the hon. Gentleman that clause 60 requires that both the commission and the council publish a forward work plan every year. That plan will include details of their projected costs, thus aiding transparency and scrutiny.

The projected costs are very modest, and it is right that the regulated should pay for regulation. I hope that the House will accept new clause 2 and the associated technical amendments.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 3

APPLICATION OF CUSTOMS AND EXCISE ENACTMENTS TO CERTAIN POSTAL PACKETS

'.—(1) Subject as follows, the enactments for the time being in force in relation to customs or excise shall apply in relation to goods contained in postal packets to which this section applies which are brought into or sent out of the United Kingdom by post from or to any place outside the United Kingdom as they apply in relation to goods otherwise imported, exported or removed into or out of the United Kingdom from or to any such place.

(2) The Treasury, on the recommendation of the Commissioners of Customs and Excise and the Secretary of State, may make regulations for—

(a) specifying the postal packets to which this section applies,

(b) making modifications or exceptions in the application of the enactments mentioned in subsection (1) to such packets,

(c) enabling persons engaged in the business of a postal operator to perform for the purposes of those enactments and otherwise all or any of the duties of the importer, exporter or person removing the goods,

(d) carrying into effect any arrangement with the government or postal administration of any other country with respect to foreign postal packets,

(e) securing the observance of the enactments mentioned in subsection (1),

(f) without prejudice to any liability of any person under those enactments, punishing any contravention of the regulations.

(3) Duties (whether of customs or excise) charged on imported goods or other charges payable in respect of postal packets to which this section applies (whether payable to a postal operator or to any other foreign administration) may be recovered by the postal operator concerned as a civil debt due to him.

(4) In any proceedings for the recovery of any charges payable as mentioned in subsection (3), a certificate of the postal operator concerned of the amount of the charges shall be evidence (and, in Scotland, sufficient evidence) of that fact.

(5) In this section "foreign postal packet" means any postal packet either posted in the United Kingdom and sent to a place outside the United Kingdom, or posted in a place outside the United Kingdom and sent to a place within the United Kingdom, or in transit through the United Kingdom to a place outside the United Kingdom.'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Alan Johnson: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government new clause 4—*Power to detain postal packets containing contraband.*

New clause 6—*Meaning of "reasonable excuse"*—

'In sections 81 and 82 "reasonable excuse" includes intentionally delaying or opening a postal packet in the course of its transmission by post—

(a) pursuant to a request from any constable or the Commissioners of Customs and Excise, or

(b) if a person reasonably suspects that the postal packet contains goods which may be illegal.'.

Government amendments Nos. 36 to 41, 43 and 52.

Mr. Johnson: These amendments bring up to date the Customs and Excise powers contained in sections 16 and 17 of the Post Office Act 1953. They are intended to maintain the powers of Customs and Excise with regard to mail being imported and exported from the UK. The powers have been updated to reflect the modern postal services environment.

New clause 3 maintains the neutrality of Customs provisions while permitting application to all postal operators under the new regime. It replaces section 16 of the 1953 Act, which applies customs legislation to postal packets, and provides a power, similar to the one in the 1953 Act, for the Treasury to make regulations specifying how the legislation should apply. It also allows duties and charges applied through this clause to be recovered by the postal operator concerned.

New clause 4 replaces section 17 of the 1953 Act. It permits postal operators to detain, and forward to Customs and Excise commissioners, any postal packet they suspect contains goods on which duty has not been paid, or the import or export of which is prohibited or restricted. Under the new clause, Customs and Excise commissioners may open and examine any postal packet forwarded to them in the presence of the addressee, or, in specified circumstances, in the addressee's absence. If the commissioners find any goods that are prohibited or on which duty has been not peen paid, they may take proceedings in relation to them. If, upon opening, the commissioners do not find any such goods, they must forward or deliver the package to the addressee.

The Government believe that it is vital that Customs and Excise is allowed to continue its important work in policing the post and that it continues to have appropriate powers. The amendments simply ensure that it will continue to have the powers that it needs to carry out its functions and duties in respect of the import and export of postal packets.

Amendments Nos 36, 37 and 38 provide that the Customs and Excise powers included in new clauses 3 and 4 are not bound by the provisions in clause 93 that relate to the inviolability of mail. Therefore, Customs powers will continue to be exempt, as they are now. The procedures in the Bill reflect exactly what has been in force for the past 47 years. These amendments replace the references to sections 16 and 17 of the 1953 Act in the current draft of the Bill with references to the new clauses.

8.15 pm

Amendments Nos. 39, 40, 41, 43 and 52 relate to how the power of the Treasury to make regulations under new clause 3 is exercisable—by statutory instrument, in the same way as other powers in the Bill under clause 109. This power will be subject to the negative resolution procedure in the House of Commons.

I commend the new clause to the House.

Mr. Page: For a brief moment, I wondered whether to embark on a war of attrition to see whether the Minister would keep going all evening or retire hurt—in which case he might end up in the same recovery bay as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan).

New clause 3 seems straightforward enough—it will place on postal operators the obligation of meeting the dues on postal packets imported into, or exported from, the United Kingdom. In addition, they will be required to put into effect any arrangements reached with the Governments or postal operators of other countries with respect to foreign postal packets.

It is characteristic of this Government that operators will be able to recover any duties charged by Customs and Excise on imported goods as a civil debt. The Government seem almost obsessed with transferring administrative responsibilities to the private sector without meeting the costs involved. There is a huge temptation for me to speak about the problems facing small businesses; however, that would not be in order.

The clause contains nothing to compensate postal operators for the costs incurred in meeting their obligations—no doubt their customers will pay more to cover those expenses. That is a convenient arrangement for the Government. They claim to be the friend of business, but in fact they are for ever adding to the burdens faced by business organisations.

New clause 6 was first moved in Committee, and the Minister gave several commitments that he would consider it again. Obviously, if he is prepared to accept it now, I should be delighted. I would sit down and waste no more time, but I see that he is shaking his head and so I must go into some detail. No doubt his severe cold is restraining his natural generosity of spirit, but I feel honour bound to repeat some of the points made in Committee. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) groans from a sedentary position, but the problem is not with me—it is with the Minister, who indicated in Committee that, after a bit of redrafting, the new clause could be greeted with enthusiasm. That redrafting has not materialised, so new clause 6 is making a reappearance.

Mr. Bercow: I look forward with enthusiasm to hearing the arguments for new clause 6 for the first time,

[Mr. Bercow]

as I did not have the inestimable privilege of being a member of the Standing Committee considering the Bill. I therefore did not hear my hon. Friend's eloquent advocacy in the first instance.

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend encourages me to go even further. I was merely going to touch briefly on the salient points, but I now feel constrained to go into the arguments in greater depth. The Minister may be starting to feel that he should have pushed a little harder on new clause 6, thus saving both of us time at the Dispatch Box.

The new clause is the same as that tabled in Committee. Again, it refers to our old friend "reasonable". I am sorry that the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) is not here, because he also has an enthusiasm for "reasonable". I had hoped that he would be here to reinforce my argument. I would have welcomed his support on such an issue, but we will have to plod on without him and make the best of it.

The Bill does not provide a clear definition of what might constitute a breach of duty, and thus an offence, by any person engaged in the business of a postal operator if, without reasonable excuse, he intentionally delays or opens a postal packet in the course of its transmission. Similarly, a person other than a postal operator who, without reasonable excuse, intentionally delays or opens a postal packet in the course of its transmission will also be guilty of an offence. A person opening a postal packet that is incorrectly delivered to him with the intention of acting to another's detriment and without reasonable excuse is also guilty of an offence. The purpose of the new clause is to draw out exactly how the Minister intends the various provisions to operate. Unless the new clause is accepted, the Bill remains unclear.

Sections 58 and 68 of the Post Office Act 1953 make it an offence, punishable by a fine and imprisonment for employees of the Post Office wilfully to delay or omit to deliver packets and messages, and for any person to solicit or endeavour to procure another person to commit such an offence. The problem is that the Bill offers no guidance as to what is a reasonable excuse. It is possible, if not probable, that the definition of that term will depend on decisions in court. Barristers and solicitors would no doubt welcome this source of employment. However, we should ensure that the legislation is as clear and transparent as possible so that people do not have to go to the courts for an interpretation. I believe that it is our duty to make the legislation as clear and transparent as possible. To push a measure through because it is convenient and easy is not the right option.

In Committee, we asked whether the wording of our new clause would permit trade unions in pursuit of industrial or political objectives to attempt to delay the transmission of postal packets. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) will be delighted to know that I suggested that the Minister would remember from his previous employment that the then Union of Post Office Workers attempted to stop the handling of mail to South Africa because it disagreed with the South African Government's politics at the time. Would that reason constitute a reasonable excuse?

The advantage of our new clause is that it would make requests from the police and Customs and Excise for delays to the transmission of postal packets or for the opening of them a sufficient defence for the offences listed in the Bill. The new clause would also offer a complete defence with regard to postal packets that contained goods in defiance of the law.

The Minister said in Committee that he would be prepared to consider the new clause. He has not done so—I am sure that that is an oversight, caused by his temporary illness. He has not been able to focus on the matter in the way in which he should have done. I mean no criticism in saying that. In the spirit of friendship, which is part of my natural wont as I go through life, I am fully prepared to admit that the drafting of the clause is not perfect. It could be honed and polished to a greater sophistication.

Mr. Bercow: I suppose that I ought to come clean—there is another reason for my concern about this matter. Fourteen years ago, as my hon. Friend is probably unaware, I was threatened with the non-distribution of my internal mail when I was a member of Lambeth borough council on the ground that the public service union concerned deprecated my political views. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should certainly not be a basis for non-distribution of mail?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend is right that I had no idea that he was threatened by the draconian sanction of not receiving his mail through the internal postal system of the council on which he served. I am not sure whether the internal system was being run by the Post Office at the time, and whether there was a responsibility that would come under the aegis of the Bill.

As I was about to say before my hon. Friend's intervention, I am prepared to accept that the new clause could be better presented, and I would be delighted to hear that the Minister is prepared to undertake that work.

Mr. Alan Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is quite right—we debated the new clause in Committee, and I would have been delighted to come to Report with the required amendment, because we need one. Unfortunately, it has not proved possible to accept new clause 6 at this stage, partly because of the complex new issue of what defines "reasonable excuse". We have solved the problem that we set out to solve, which was that since the time of Queen Anne, under successive Post Office Acts it has been an offence wilfully to delay the mail. Wilful delay of the mail carried no excuse—there were no criteria as to whether that action could have proved reasonable. Therefore, an awful lot of problems occurred with wilful delay of the mail. Indeed, in the very incident to which the hon. Gentleman referred, when the Union of Post Office Workers took industrial action against the despicable regime of apartheid in South Africa, a judge at the time ruled that the wilful delay provision, which was originally put in place to deal with highwaymen, would be used as a reason why the union should not have the right to go on strike. I see that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) agrees with that.

There were problems with the phrase "wilful delay", and the phrase "reasonable excuse" was believed to be a way around them. I apologise for not having the amendment ready at this stage. We will have to do it in another place, and I very much hope that it will meet all the concerns that have been raised.

New clause 6 does not solve the problem. As we discussed in Committee, it would create enormous problems if people could open mail if they reasonably suspected that a postal packet contained goods that may be illegal. The inviolability of mail is a major part of the Bill and one can imagine the problems in a court of law if people could breach that inviolability because they suspected that a packet might contain something illegal, for whatever spurious reasons. I understand that the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) is trying to resolve a difficulty that we want to resolve.

Mr. Bercow: I understand where the Minister is coming from. The new clause is as much as anything a probing motion. It is entirely reasonable for him to cavil at the idea that someone might tamper with mail on the basis of suspicion, but would he agree that demonstrable reason to believe might be a justification?

8.30 pm

Mr. Johnson: That is one of the matters that we are examining. We must do so in the context of other legislation that is passing through the House and the universal declaration of human rights. Complications are coming from other areas. However, the hon. Gentleman has raised a valid point, which we shall explore with the aim of dealing with it by introducing an amendment in another place.

Mr. Brady: I seek clarification of one point that has arisen during this short exchange. Will the Minister make it clear that when the Government bring forward their amendment or new clause, it will not be considered reasonable for a trade union or any other body to decide on political grounds whether mail should be allowed to go to one country or another or one company or another, however despicable the regime might be? Does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable for trade unions or other bodies to interfere with the mail?

Mr. Johnson: I think that that issue was dealt with in a piece of legislation in 1981. The action to which reference has been made took place in 1978, and I do not regard it as being part of the Bill. Perhaps employment relations legislation is the right area in which to raise it.

I hope that the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire will feel able to withdraw the new clause on the basis of my comments.

Mr. Page: In the spirit of co-operation, and bearing in mind the Minister's poor health, I shall not press him any further at this stage. However, I look forward to him introducing—this will be the third time of asking—a suitable amendment in another place that will address a serious problem. The amendment should be inserted in the Bill, rather than leaving the matter to the courts to try to find a solution.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 4

POWER TO DETAIN POSTAL PACKETS CONTAINING CONTRABAND

'.—(1) A postal operator may—

(a) detain any postal packet if he suspects that it may contain relevant goods,

(b) forward any packet so detained to the Commissioners of Customs and Excise.

(2) In this section "relevant goods" means—

(a) any goods chargeable with any duty charged on imported goods (whether a customs or an excise duty) which has not been paid or secured, or

(b) any goods in the course of importation, exportation or removal into or out of the United Kingdom contrary to any prohibition or restriction for the time being in force by virtue of any enactment.

(3) Subsection (1) is without prejudice to section (*Application of customs and excise enactments to certain postal packets*).

(4) The Commissioners may open and examine any postal packet forwarded to them under this section—

(a) in the presence of the person to whom the packet is addressed, or

(b) where the address on the packet is outside the United Kingdom or where subsection (5) applies, in the absence of that person.

(5) This subsection applies where—

(a) the Commissioners have—

(i) left at the address on the packet notice requiring the attendance of the person concerned, or

(ii) forwarded such notice by post to that address, and

(b) the addressee fails to attend.

(6) If the Commissioners find any relevant goods on opening and examining a postal packet under this section, they may detain the packet and its contents for the purpose of taking proceedings in relation to them.

(7) If the Commissioners do not find any relevant goods on opening and examining a postal packet under this section, they shall—

(a) deliver the packet to the addressee upon his paying any postage and other sums chargeable on it, or

(b) if he is absent, forward the packet to him by post.'.—*[Mr. Byers.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 5

TAX

'. Schedule (*Transfer to the Post Office company: tax*) (taxation provisions in relation to the transfer to the Post Office company) shall have effect.'.—*[Mr. Byers.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Byers: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government new schedule 1—*Transfer to the Post Office Company: Tax*—

Government amendments Nos. 49 to 51 and 54.

Mr. Byers: This is a group of technical amendments that make the transfer of property rights and liabilities from the Post Office to the Post Office Company tax neutral.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 7

EXCEPTIONS FROM SECTION 6

Mr. Page: I beg to move amendment No. 60, in page 4, line 36, leave out "£1" and insert "50p".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 61, in page 4, line 38, leave out "350" and insert "150".

No. 62, in clause 13, page 9, line 9, at end insert—

'(2A) The provisions of a licence to be held by a universal service provider shall—

(a) require—

(i) the keeping of separate accounts for each of the postal services which may not be provided unless the licence is held and any other postal services, and

(ii) the accounts for any other postal services clearly to distinguish between services which are part of a universal postal service and services which are not; and

(b) prohibit cross-subsidies between the postal services which may not be provided unless the licence is held and any other postal services which are not part of a universal postal service.'.

No. 64, in clause 15, page 10, line 11, leave out "may" and insert "shall".

No. 65, in page 10, line 11, after second "Commission", insert "every three years".

No. 66, in page 10, line 14, leave out—

', which are specified in the reference and'.

No. 67, in page 10, line 15, after "of", insert "a universal".

No. 68, in page 10, line 15, leave out "services" and insert "service".

No. 69, in page 10, line 43, at end insert—

'except for references under subsection (1) above.'

No. 72, in clause 43, page 28, line 13, at end insert—

'(1A) In performing its duty under subsection (1)(a) the Commission shall compare annually the efficiency and economy in the provision of postal services by licence holders with the provision (in the United Kingdom and elsewhere) of postal services and other delivery services.'.

No. 73, in clause 44, page 29, line 2, at end insert—

'( ) a report on the findings which arise from the performance by the Commission of its duties under section 43(1)(a).'

Mr. Page: Since the publication of the Government's White Paper on the future of the Post Office last summer, on Second Reading and in Committee, Ministers have advanced the argument that the present Administration wish to press ahead with liberalisation. They want to open up the area within which the Post Office's current monopoly operates. I and my right hon. and hon. Friends share that ambition. Now is the Minister's opportunity to take a step towards opening up the Post Office and liberalising its operation.

Unfortunately, the wish to go down the path of liberalisation is not shared by some of those right hon. and hon. Members who sit behind the Minister or by some of their trade union allies. It took only a suggestion in the White Paper last year that the price of letters falling within the Post Office monopoly might be halved from £1 to 50p to cause those shadowy union figures who exercise so much influence over new Labour, as they did over old Labour, to become alarmed.

When the Government placed an advertisement in *The Sunday Times* for the post of chairman of the proposed Postal Services Commission in mid-September, they clearly specified the need for greater competition in the postal services market. The first major step towards liberalisation was to be taken with the reduction from £1 to 50p of letters falling within the monopoly on 1 April 2000.

I want to give the Government every credit for their stout defence against the forces that were mobilised against that change. Having laid their statutory instrument before the House to introduce it, Ministers held out for at least two or three weeks before doing a U-turn. Old Labour pulled the strings and the Government did what they almost always do when faced with opposition within their ranks: they rolled over and surrendered.

It is pointless for the Minister to say by way of explanation that the Government were persuaded to back-track because of their plans based on the report of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry last September. The entire House has tremendous respect for that Committee. I do not believe that the Government should be involved in consultation on the appointment of members of the Postal Services Commission. It is more than a bit rich for Ministers to regard the Select Committee as an authority whose advice must be followed on the scope of the Post Office monopoly when, in their view, it is not well qualified to take a view on the composition of the members of the commission, which will be responsible for determining the limit once the Bill is enacted.

The Government have already made the case for reducing the limit to 50p, but they have had a temporary moment of weakness. I hope that my amendment will encourage them to return to their previous position. The Government rightly recognised last summer and autumn that the Post Office would inevitably be exposed to greater competition in its current monopoly area. As night follows day, international competition will grow and pressures will build. The Government were conscious that the sooner the process of adjusting to greater competition began, the better the prospects for the Post Office, and I endorse that view.

I invite the Government to have the courage of their own convictions and not to leave the decision to reduce the limit to the Postal Services Commission. Promoting competition must be more than a slogan, a soundbite or mere spin. When the Government say something, they must mean it and stick by it, but we must doubt whether that will be so. They paid lip service to competition for only as long as the occupants of smoke-filled back rooms did not kick up any fuss. They should kick the habit, give up smoking and bring the Post Office into the real world and the clean, fresh air of competition.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that his salutary amendment puts the Minister for Competitiveness under the spotlight and to the test? We shall listen with interest to the Minister's reply. The Secretary of State has made consistent pro-competition noises and has made

considerable progress in his political career not by submitting to, but by taking on, the trade unions. I fear, however, that the suspicion lurks that the Minister for Competitiveness, whose background is in organised labour, may be a little unsound and may have sought to dissuade the Secretary of State from his previous intention. Must we not be assured that the Minister is on-side?

Mr. Page: There is greater joy in heaven over the prodigal that returns than over the person who remained constant all the time. I have always felt it very unfair that the person in the parable who played the game and did all the work got no credit when the rogue and the vagabond who squandered the family inheritance was welcomed back and the fatted calf was killed for him. Nevertheless, I am of a generous nature, as I keep telling the House, although no one believes me. If the Minister were to announce that he had forsaken his old ways and was coming back to the paths of righteousness and competition, I should be the first to pay tribute to his conversion.

Our raft of amendments flows towards the same point—increased competition. Amendment No. 61 would reduce the weight from 350 g to 150 g. The arguments in favour of reducing the weight limit over which the Post Office retains a monopoly are just as cogent as those for reducing the price at which the monopoly is effective. The Government argued for that only last year, but, as on price, they have retreated in the face of their trade union allies. I have to assume that that explains the unusually coy terms in which the Minister referred to the proposals in the 1999 White Paper and the abortive statutory instrument subsequently laid before a Standing Committee on 9 March.

I realise that that point is embarrassing for Ministers, who are understandably sensitive. I do not want to highlight it too greatly, but, as Oscar Wilde, I think, once said, there is a good deal to be said for blushing if one can do it at the proper time. The Minister should occasionally blush when he thinks over the saga of embarrassment within his Department.

If it was right to argue last year for a reduction in the weight limit, it remains right today. The longer the Post Office is shielded from serious competition within its monopoly area, the greater its difficulties will be when it has to face rival operators in the previously protected areas. That competition cannot be avoided for ever. It will come, no matter what the Government may say or do to try to prevent it.

We have seen what happened as regards job losses and plant closures as a result of the Department of Trade and Industry's failure to anticipate what was happening in areas such as the Rover car company. When the Post Office suddenly starts to shed jobs because it has been exposed to market competition, we shall no doubt hear the Government trying to shield themselves by saying that wicked foreigners are not playing by the rules. They will say that the Postal Services Commission acted on its own precipitately to reduce the price and weight limits. The miracle cure of a task force will be wheeled out yet again to save the day.

8.45 pm

All that can be avoided if the Government accept the logic of their own arguments. The arguments that I have made were all previously advanced by the Government and would allow the Post office progressively to be exposed to further competition. It can adjust successfully to meet that competition and the Government would do well to give it that opportunity right now.

Amendment No. 62 is simple; it has one clear purpose—to ensure that the universal service provider keeps separate accounts for the services to be offered in respect of the licence to be held by that person or organisation, and for other postal services that might be supplied in the market. The amendment was tabled simply to prohibit the potential cross-subsidisation by a universal service provider of other postal services that lie outside its universal service.

The Government want a level playing field; they want fair play. What better way to achieve that aim than by accepting our amendment? Our concerns were prompted by the position of Parcelforce in the Post Office's operation. It has made losses over several years—far too many years, some people may say. It has been able to survive because it has been cross-subsidised by other operations in the Post Office monopoly. There is no doubt that its commercial rivals have suffered as a result, because they have not had the advantages of protection to sustain loss-making activities. The phrase "level playing field" is a terrible one, but everyone knows what it means; it is vital that we have one so that that situation does not continue after the Bill is passed.

I do not know how the Minister will react to the amendment, although I can make a strong guess. The Government made their position clear on the other amendments that I tabled—I am now offering them a little backbone, so that they can make progress. I suspect that they might be reluctant to accept the amendment, for fear of offending the Communication Workers Union. They may argue that it is for the Post Office to arrange its commercial affairs in the competitive environment into which it is being thrust.

Why tie the Post Office down with such restrictions? Why does the Minister not go ahead and give the organisation a fair and open trading position so that everyone knows exactly where they stand?

I make no apology for pointing out that amendments Nos. 64 to 69 are among the most important to be tabled by my right hon. and hon. Friends. They constitute a critical test of the Government's commitment to the process of competition. At present, clause 15 permits the Postal Services Commission to request the Competition Commission to investigate practices that may act, or may be expected to act, against the public interest and to report on whether modifications to the licence conditions might produce appropriate remedies. It also offers the Postal Services Commission latitude to vary the terms of reference to the Competition Commission and to advance its own view on the nature of any potentially adverse effects of licence modifications on dealing with such problems.

[Mr. Page]

Furthermore, the Secretary of State may step in—as one might expect, because he appears either directly, or as some shadowy figure, behind most of the Bill—to

direct the Competition Commission not to proceed

with any reference to it, nor "to give effect" to any variation of the terms of reference previously made by the Postal Services Commission.

The permissive nature of these provisions—the opportunities that the Postal Services Commission will have to decide whether to make a reference to the Competition Commission and to alter the terms of the reference once made, quite apart from the ability of the Secretary of State to cut short any investigation—seems strongly at variance with the Government's declared aims of promoting competition and preventing anti-competitive practices.

My speech may be becoming a little too biblical, but I was going to say that that variance reminds me of the sinner who wanted to be virtuous but preferred not to be just yet—and we all remember the story of the maiden lady saying her prayers. *[Interruption.]* If the Minister does not know the story, I shall tell him afterwards and let him into the secret. It is not terribly scandalous.

The amendments in my name and that of my hon. Friend the hors de combat Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) have a single purpose: to ensure that the Postal Services Commission is obliged to refer the activities of universal service providers to the Competition Commission every three years for a determination of whether they operate in the public interest. I do not believe that regular examination of the Post Office's activities will do it any harm if it is working in the overall public interest. It would be seen not to have indulged in any anti-competitive practices. Only those who have something to hide will seek to object.

However, I expect that the Minister will tell me that the licence conditions under which the Post Office is expected to operate will ensure that it does not conduct its activities in an anti-competitive way. I have no doubt that we shall be told that the universal service providers, whether one or many, will be subject to competition law. So they will, and so they should be.

The trouble with that view is that it does not take into account the way in which monopolies operate. We need to be sure that the Post Office will be properly controlled and its activities regularly scrutinised. I am worried that the regulator alone cannot do that task.

The relationship between a powerful monopoly and its statutory regulator is complex and full of tensions. I served on the Committee that considered what became the Telecommunications Act 1984, which split telecoms from the Post Office and then privatised them, so I am fully aware of how tensions can move into a relationship between regulator and monopoly. The relationship resembles a marriage. Both partners need each other and cannot live apart, but there is a tendency for them to bicker constantly. That was certainly true of BT and Oftel for the first few years of their dealings with each other.

The one thing that the arrangements for the external scrutiny proposed in clause 15 do not offer is the periodic appearance of a marriage guidance counsellor. Amendments Nos. 64 to 69 address that issue and close that gap. It will help if an independent person studies the relationship periodically to ensure that it is fair and that there is fair play on both sides. I believe that that would ensure that the relationship between the Postal Services Commission and the industry that it regulates does not become too close—that there is no possibility of excessive familiarity between partners in that relationship.

We all know the problems that can exist when hostages are taken, and the relationship between kidnapper and hostage becomes close and ceases to be antagonistic. Sometimes hostages go out of their way to protect the kidnapper. I know that I am now making a slightly broader parallel, but I believe that our suggestions would prevent excessive familiarity between the partners in that relationship. As a result, the Competition Commission could take a dispassionate look at the postal services industry's licence holders regularly but not too frequently.

Mr. Bercow: Would my hon. Friend like to say something about paragraph (b) of amendment No. 62, tabled in his name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan)? That amendment seems eminently reasonable, and I will be genuinely perplexed if Ministers do not support it. Can my hon. Friend enlighten me?

Mr. Page: I have always had great difficulty in grasping why Ministers do not support my amendments, because I have always thought all those amendments, both here and in Committee, to be eminently reasonable and practicable in helping the Post Office and the whole postal industry to provide a better service in the very competitive world outside.

Dr. George Turner (North–West Norfolk) *rose—*

Mr. Page: The hon. Gentleman must hold his horses as I gallop to the end of my sentence.

It amazes me that the Minister has not accepted our amendments. But I am being very kind to him today, because he is obviously under the weather. He is not well, and he is struggling to get through, so I shall not push too many of my amendments to what should be their logical conclusion.

Dr. Turner: I should like to take the opportunity to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on at least realising the wisdom of withdrawing the amendment he moved in Committee that would have halved the weight of the parcels participating in the universal service. It seems that he does not, on reflection, think that all the amendments he moved in Committee were sensible, and I congratulate him.

Mr. Page: I am always open to congratulations. Flattery, rather than kicks, gets people further in the world. But it will come as a huge surprise to the hon. Gentleman that not every amendment that one tables is selected for debate. There were a number of amendments that we would have liked to table, but did not, because we did not believe that they would be selected. I must express appreciation to the powers that be that have allowed these amendments to be given another run around the course. I hope that this time the Minister will stiffen his backbone, take his courage in both hands, act in accordance with all the other metaphors and similes that I can think of, and accept them.

I shall say no more about that amendment and draw my remarks to a close by saying a few words about amendment No. 73.

The amendments that we are considering arise from issues that both I and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton raised in Committee. We argued then, and on my hon. Friend's behalf I argue again now, that it would be appropriate for the regulatory body to collect information about the development of postal services within the rest of Europe and about the performance of the postal service providers there.

If my memory serves me correctly, the Minister broadly agreed that that would be sensible. I do not want to say "desirable", but when we discussed the matter he seemed to express some enthusiasm. I am sorry to say that his apparent generosity on that occasion does not appear to have been translated into action.

My hon. Friend indicated that we would raise the matter again on Report if there was no response, or an inadequate response, by the Department. That explains why I am returning to the matter now. I hope that the Minister will think again about the small burst of enthusiasm for this measure that he expressed in Committee and consider whether he feels like accepting it now.

As I said, this clutch of amendments would gear up the Post Office to face a competitive world that will become even more competitive. Fairly soon, there will be pressures from Europe on our postal services and on the Royal Mail. The quicker that we start to adjust to them and to prepare for them, the better.

9 pm

Mr. Cotter: As the hon. Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) said, Conservative Members attempted in Committee to hit severely at the universal service. They have possibly since taken fright at that, because we are dealing with a serious issue. Communities are at risk and people expect and are entitled to expect a good service. We have had a universal service for many years. However, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, one form of amendment was tabled in Committee but the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) has made another attempt to attack the universal service and that is linked to the reduction in the limit from £1 to 50p.

I do not understand the purpose of the amendment. An attack on the universal service would affect people across the country. Under the Bill, the regulator has an obligation to consider this issue, and I would much prefer his considered view to this amendment.

Serious issues are involved. The £1 limit has been in place for many years, and has effectively reduced in value. Competition from e-mail and other services is another factor, and if the limit were reduced the estimated loss of income to the Post Office would be about £100 million. In addition, people in rural areas would suffer a diminution in their service.

If, in due course, the regulator examines the issues that I have raised and comes to the conclusion, after careful consideration, that the proposal in the amendment is a way forward, it will be a different story. The regulator will have considered the issues properly and taken into account the position as it will be after the Bill has been enacted. That is preferable to accepting the amendment tonight. I look forward to the Minister's response. Instead of taking the precipitate action proposed in the amendment, we should consider carefully any suggestion that might affect the universal service.

Mr. Alan Johnson: The hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) mentioned prodigal sons, broken marriages and kidnapping. I thought that he was devising a Jeffrey Archer plot rather than considering the Postal Services Bill.

Amendments Nos. 60 and 61 contain arguments that are so stale that they are curling at the edges. We debated the matter in the House on 8 December on a revocation order and we debated it again in Committee. I very much appreciate the remarks of the hon. Member for Weston–super–Mare (Mr. Cotter), but I remind him that he moved an amendment in Committee to bring down the £1 monopoly limit to 50p. It was forced to a vote and he voted against his own amendment.

Mr. Cotter: As the Minister knows very well, we were trying to probe a point and he has misrepresented me very badly. On that occasion, he accused me of being mischievous, so I accuse him of being equally mischievous tonight.

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Gentleman may well be right.

Our argument is simple. The Trade and Industry Committee report suggested that instead of taking the drastic step of halving the monopoly at the very time we are setting up the Postal Services Commission, it would make sense, as the hon. Gentleman said, for us to ask the commission to do the necessary work. It should also make the judgment not whether to reduce the monopoly level to 50p but whether to reduce it at all, and if so by how much. That argument is perfectly defensible.

On that basis, the Conservatives have accused us of delay. Their manifesto for the 1992 election, which they won—it will probably be their last election win for many a year—contained a commitment to introduce a regulator and reduce the monopoly limit to a level closer to the price of a first-class stamp. The party that is so keen on competition and regulation did absolutely nothing about those manifesto commitments, which many hon. Members on both sides of the House would have supported. Instead, it went off on a wild adventure of privatisation. If one sprinkled the Conservatives' manifesto with rosewater, held it up to the light and looked at it from every angle, one would find no reference to privatisation.

We are having to wait a few months for the commission to be set up and, perhaps, for the monopoly limit to be reduced. We agreed that the limit should be sufficient only to guarantee universal service at a uniform tariff. That is the principal objective that we have given the commission. As to the wait, I can only say to the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire that under the previous Government we waited five years and there was no movement at all.

It was timely of my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner) to point out that Conservative Members, who say that they are defending the universal service obligation, tabled an amendment in Committee which would have allowed parcels to be delivered in remote rural areas outside the terms of the universal service obligation. That would particularly have affected

[Mr. Johnson]

parts of Scotland such as the highlands and islands, where the Conservatives have no parliamentary representation. They have met Disraeli's great objective of being a one nation party: they have no Members in Wales or Scotland; they have Members only in England.

That amendment would have meant that the Post Office would no longer have a commitment to deliver to those areas, and if it did so, it could charge a higher tariff for going to the far north or to remote rural areas. We should remember that proposal the next time the Conservatives start banging on about how devoted they are to the universal service obligation. The Opposition's arguments are stale and we have debated them in the House before. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have the sense not to press amendments Nos. 60 and 61 to a vote, but, if he does, I hope that they will be defeated.

I cannot be much kinder about amendment No. 62, which thuds along heavily like a dinosaur through the Bill's lush terrain. We have debated the matter before. It is our intention that the requirements on universal service providers—such as quality of service standards, regulatory accounts, complaints and compensation schemes—will be imposed and enforced through the licensing regime. The outline licence has been distributed and comments are invited until September. All contributions will be gratefully received. Such matters should be dealt with in that manner, not in the Bill. We are setting up a commission, and we ought to allow it to decide how to do its work.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is not in his place, but he was seized by new subsection (2A)(b) in the amendment, which refers to cross-subsidies. That matter is decided by the European postal directive, which will bring him no comfort. The directive allows cross-subsidy from the reserved to the non-reserved area, provided that it is necessary to maintain a universal service, so parcels, for example, can be cross-subsidised in certain circumstances. That is why the amendment should not be pressed.

I can be a little kinder about amendments Nos. 64 to 69, which at least show a little originality. However, if I have understood their purpose correctly, it rather stands on its head the amendment that we introduced in Committee to give the Postal Services Commission the ability to refer to the Competition Commission any matters on which it considered that there was a conflict with public interest. Under the Bill as amended, the Postal Services Commission will have that important power to protect the public interest, and we need no further amendments to that effect.

Finally, on amendments Nos. 72 and 73, perhaps I am becoming a little more mellow. The amendments would create a specific duty, requiring the commission to compare annually the efficiency and economy of postal services provided by licence holders to postal services in general, in the UK and elsewhere.

The problem is that that is an unnecessary level of prescription. It specifies exactly how the commission should carry out its duties. We think that that should be left to the commission. It suggests that the commission should carry out benchmarking annually. The commission can decide on the importance of benchmarking and whether it should be done annually, biennially or whenever. It is ridiculous for the Bill to be prescriptive on such issues.

In addition, the amendment specifies that the commission should carry out its work to an arbitrary time scale, which once again is not helpful.

We have said many times that our intention in the Bill is to set up an independent regulator. The Bill sets out the main functions, duties and powers of the commission, but it does not tell the commission how to fulfil those functions. That is for the commission to decide; otherwise it would not be a fully independent body. The amendment goes against the concept of the independent regulator. I therefore hope that the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire will withdraw it.

Mr. Page: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response to the amendments that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) and I submitted.

I thought that the Minister was remarkably cruel to the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter). He should remember that the hon. Gentleman represents a party that is the Government's ally in Scotland. I find it slightly hurtful that the Minister should so thoroughly humiliate the hon. Gentleman in the Chamber. I suggest that, in future, the Minister should adopt the approach of forgiving the hon. Gentleman because he knoweth not what he does.

We all know that when the Government are in trouble, they start harking back to the past, going back to the previous Government and history, when they should be looking to the future. The plain fact is that a year ago, the Government announced their intention to introduce certain reductions of the limits, and within a week or so, under a little pressure, they collapsed and caved in. Now the Minister is trying to get the commission to do the Government's work for them. I find that unsatisfactory. In his position, I would find it highly embarrassing. Nevertheless, in the circumstances, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Alan Johnson: I beg to move amendment No. 30, in page 5, line 35, leave out from "letters" to end of line 39 and insert—

'of members of a document exchange from a departure facility for that exchange to an arrival facility for another document exchange by persons who are not members of either exchange, and the collection and delivery by such persons for that purpose of letters delivered to the departure facility concerned,'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 31 to 33, 19 to 22, 47, 23 to 29 and 53.

Mr. Johnson: In view of the time and my cold, I shall be brief. The amendments are technical and deal with matters such as petitions to the National Assembly for Wales. Hon. Members who served on the Committee may remember that we gave a commitment to introduce relevant amendments on Report.

I shall spend a couple of minutes on certain aspects of amendments Nos. 30 to 33, which deal with document exchange centres. I need to put on record the reasoning behind the amendments.

9.15 pm

We have a general policy of replacing the system of class licences with exceptions to clause 6. Document exchange is currently subject to a class licence, and including this exception in the Bill will allow a useful service to continue. Document exchange is a system used by many professionals, such as lawyers and insurers, who are members of a local document exchange to exchange documents with other members of that local document exchange. We have already defined such an exchange in the Bill as a system involving at least three members for each local document exchange, in order to ensure that this does not become an end-to-end service breaching the reserved area without a licence.

Similar institutions exist in Europe, but they are not common. In the United Kingdom, the system has developed almost uniquely to include the conveyance and sorting of letters between document exchanges, with the result that a national network linking document exchanges has evolved.

The amendment makes it clear that the exception allows for the conveyance of letters between document exchanges by a third party. We have now defined that more closely as transport between the departure facility of one document exchange and conveyance to the arrival facility of another document exchange. What the exception is not intended to do is permit end-to-end delivery by a third party. That would allow cream-skimming: it would allow unlicensed operators to jeopardise the universal service at a uniform tariff. To ensure that that does not happen, conveyance can occur only between the arrival and departure facilities of the document exchange, not within the document exchange. The letters being conveyed must be intended for a document exchange other than the one from which they are being sent, and the third party providing the service must not be a member of either of the document exchanges concerned.

The members of any document exchange are responsible for the delivery and collection of their own letters. The amendment that we tabled earlier inadvertently left the slim possibility that a third party could take letters between the members within an exchange. Although the possibility was only slim, we could see that the loophole could have been exploited to create a rival end-to-end delivery system to a licensed universal service provider, but without having to obtain a licence from the commission. The amendment removes that possibility.

As of now, nothing in the amendment would prevent the arrival and departure facilities from being located on the premises of a member of the exchange, as is frequently the case in the United Kingdom—although the requirement for three members means that it would not be possible to establish a sham document exchange in which the only member was the person on whose premises the exchange was located.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 31, in page 6, line 10, at end insert—

'"arrival facility", in relation to a document exchange, means any box, receptacle or other facility associated with that exchange which is provided for the receipt of letters from members of another document exchange which are conveyed to the facility from a departure facility for that other exchange for collection by members of the first exchange,'.

No. 32, in page 7, line 2, at end insert—

'"departure facility", in relation to a document exchange, means any box, receptacle or other facility associated with that exchange which is provided for the collection of letters of members of that exchange which are delivered to the facility by those members for conveyance to an arrival facility for another document exchange for collection by members of that other exchange,'.

No. 33, in page 7, leave out lines 5 to 7.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 27

ENFORCEMENT ORDERS: FURTHER PROCEDURAL REQUIREMENTS

Mr. Alan Johnson: I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 18, line 28, after "modifications", insert—

'and the Commission complies with the requirements of subsection (1A)'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 2 to 9.

Amendment No. 70, in clause 38, page 25, line 8, at end insert—

'and if a person objects to entry of anything in the register, he may appeal to the Secretary of State who may direct the Commission not to enter it.'.

Government amendments Nos. 10 to 14.

Amendment No. 74, in clause 53, page 33, line 41, at end insert—

'( ) The Council shall, in exercising its functions, have regard to the interests of—

(a) individuals who are disabled or chronically sick,

(b) individuals of pensionable age,

(c) individuals with low incomes,

(d) individuals residing in rural areas, and

(e) individuals who are homeless,

but that is not to be taken as implying that regard may not be had to the interests of other descriptions of persons.'.

Mr. Johnson: I hope that hon. Members will find our amendments uncontroversial, but I ask the House to resist amendments Nos. 70 and 74.

The main purpose of amendments Nos. 1 to 8 is to introduce the change that I promised the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) when he withdrew a similar amendment in Committee. They will make sensible changes to the Bill. When the Postal Services Commission is able, under clause 27, to modify an enforcement order with the consent of the licence holder, it will now have to comply with the requirements of the new subsection that we are introducing. It will have to give notice of the proposed change to the Consumer Council for Postal Services, and must consider any representations that it makes. That will provide an additional chance for consumers' interests to be aired.

Amendments Nos. 6 and 7 are minor technical measures. They are simply a matter of common sense, requiring all relevant parties to be given notice of the commission's decisions. Amendment No. 9 is a small

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consequential amendment to clause 38. It flows from the introduction of a licence modification procedure in Committee.

Amendments Nos. 10 and 11 to clause 43 tackle an anxiety that was raised in Committee by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who we hope is now sitting up and eating his Scotch broth. Clause 43 currently requires the commission to keep under review and collect information on postal services

in the United Kingdom and elsewhere . . .

We agree that other European Community states, which operate under the same directive, are likely to provide especially useful comparisons and that there is merit in amending the clause to emphasise the commission's role in collecting and keeping under review information on the provision of postal services in EC member states.

Amendments Nos. 12 to 14 deal with another anxiety that the hon. Member for Weston–super–Mare raised in Committee. Clause 53 currently specifies that the council must have regard to the views of users in different areas when carrying out its functions in relation to the relevant postal services. The purpose of the amendments is to clarify that the council, in exercising its functions, should consider the interests of the specified groups of individuals.

I understand that the reason for amendment No. 70 is to ensure adequate safeguards to protect the affairs of individuals. That is a worthy objective about which we agree. However, we believe that clause 38 sufficiently protects the rights of individuals.

Mr. Page: The Minister was brutal to the hon. Member for Weston–super–Mare (Mr. Cotter), but it was unnecessary to go over the top and try to accommodate him by tabling one or two minor amendments. If the Minister is going to be rude to someone, he should stick to that and not try to make amends in such a mealy-mouthed manner. If he tells me that crawling is successful, I am prepared to crawl to advance amendment No. 70. However, I have a strange feeling that, no matter how I abased myself, I would not gain the Minister's approval for the amendment.

Amendment No. 70 seeks to amend clause 38 to ensure that information about anyone's commercial interests is not entered on the register that is available for inspection by the public. It would also grant the right to raise with the Secretary of State an objection to an entry on the register. I cannot understand why an individual's justifiable right to such provisions should be resisted.

The current proposal for protecting confidential commercial information from disclosure on the register of licence is inadequate. It could discourage potential postal operators from applying for licences. The White Paper published in July 1999 and entitled "Post Office Reform: A world class service for the 21st century" was often cited in Committee. It dealt with the regulator's powers to publish information. Paragraph 32 on page 8 states:

The Regulator will have . . . a power to publish information for the benefit of consumers and in the interests of good regulation, subject to tests relating to substantial harm, including matters of commercial confidentiality and public interest.

The need to protect commercial interests was further acknowledged in the White Paper in relation to the Post Office's five-year strategic plan, which states:

The aim will be to report—

to Parliament—

once the Strategic Plan has been approved.

That need was also acknowledged in the 12th report of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which considered major acquisitions by the Post Office. The report states:

We recommend the greatest possible degree of transparency compatible with genuine requirements of commercial confidentiality on this and future major purchases by the Post Office.

Amendment No. 70 would make the Bill consistent with the detail of the White Paper. It recognises the importance to potential licence holders of protecting information relating to their commercial interests that may be disclosed to the regulator as part of the application process. It would encourage them to be more open with the regulator in the knowledge that their commercial interests would be protected. It would impose an express obligation on the regulator to secure the exclusion from the register of information that affected commercial interests.

However, amendment No. 70 would retain the provision's flexibility by continuing to allow the regulator to use discretion so far as is practical and enter in the register information that would be in the public interest. As a further safeguard, it would give people the express right to object to the Secretary of State about the entry of any item. That would complement his existing power to direct the regulator not to enter items. The amendment is perfectly fair. It would protect commercial interests and encourage those who make applications, as they would know that their commercial secrets would not be divulged. It would be of general benefit.

Mr. Drew: Can the hon. Gentleman give an example that would go to the Secretary of State, but would not go to the commission? I am struggling to think of one.

Mr. Page: I can understand the hon. Gentleman struggling; I listened to part of his speech and understand his difficulties. A commercial company may want to have certain details entered on the register, but not those of a marketing plan that it wished to introduce, an activity that it wanted to undertake to gain extra market share, or a method of delivery or operation. It might want matters such as potential ownership to be kept back. I can see no difficulty with that because such information might help the opposition and that would damage the company's interests.

Time is moving on, so I shall speak to amendment No. 74, which would insert the words:

The Council shall, in exercising its functions, have regard to the interest of . . . individuals who are disabled or chronically sick . . . of pensionable age . . . with low incomes . . . residing in rural area, and . . . homeless . . .

That matter arose in Committee in a slightly different form. For the life of us, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) and I could not understand why the Minister refused to allow the Bill to cover the homeless—a vulnerable section of society that should be protected. As he has shown again this evening, he seems to have set his face against looking after the homeless.

In an age of improved communication, it is surely indefensible that the Government have not highlighted the homeless as one of the groups for which the council should have regard. The expansion of electronic communications means that the council should consider the interests of the homeless as much as it considers those of the others on that list, such as the elderly, the disabled or the chronically sick. Why not the homeless? That could be easily achieved by designating a post office box number so that they could receive mail at a sub-post office.

9.30 pm

The problem of homelessness is growing in importance because the Government have failed to tackle it. The most recent Government figures show that, in the past year, there were 105,900 priority homelessness acceptances. In a comparable period in 1997, the figure was still far too high, but it was 102,410, so there has been an increase of more than 3,000.

The measure could help the homeless to take a proper place in society. If one extrapolates the trend—I should like to think that the Government are trying to do something about it—it means that, every day under this Government, five more people are being forced into homelessness.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am touched by the hon. Gentleman's compassion for the homeless, but if you are arguing for more to be done for the homeless than giving them a post code and somewhere to collect their mail, I could understand it. However, could you explain—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hancock: I beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman perhaps anticipates the intervention that I must make.

Mr. Hancock: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I should be grateful if the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) would explain the real benefit that he is trying to get for the homeless through that proposition.

Mr. Page: It is nice of the hon. Gentleman to drop into the debate, which has been taking place for a number of hours. He was in for a few minutes several hours ago. Frankly, if I have to explain to the Liberal Democrats the advantages of helping the homeless, we are in difficulty. As I have already said—I shall repeat for the hon. Gentleman very slowly—in this time of electronic communication, it must be of advantage that the homeless are able to have a post office box number for communication and to get advice and support from the Government, rather than using the insecure and inaccurate methods that exist at present. I would like to think that, when the hon. Gentleman looks at *Hansard*, he will be consumed with embarrassment that he has been so dismissive of that genuine attempt to help the homeless.

The Minister will know that this is not a one-off attempt, or something that has just been produced. We ran it in Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton, who unfortunately cannot be with us this evening, argued far more eloquently than I have that the homeless should be included, yet the Minister seems to turn it down. I remind him that the Prime Minister promised that Labour would

> do everything in our power to end the scandal of homelessness, to tackle the spectacle of people sleeping rough on the streets and to end the waste of families sleeping in bed and breakfast accommodation.

Surely, including the homeless in the Bill is a step in the right direction.

Mr. Alan Johnson: As I have said, we believe that clause 38 provides sufficient protection. Amendment No. 70 would undermine the commission's independence by substituting for its discretion what would amount to a formal mechanism for persons to appeal to the Secretary of State if they object to an entry, together with a power for the Secretary of State to direct the commission not to make an entry, if he so decides. Such a procedure would be an unnecessary bureaucratic burden on the Secretary of State and would limit the discretion and independence of the commission without substantively increasing the protection of individuals. Regardless, clause 38(7) provides the power for the Secretary of State to direct the commission not to enter in the register anything that he considers

> would be against the public interest or any person's commercial interests.

Inevitably, use of that procedure would also result in delays in getting information on the register, and in the register containing less up-to-date information than is appropriate in the interests of good, fair and open regulation. The presumption must be that entries are made, and that only in exceptional circumstances should an entry not be made. Provision for that is already made fully in clause 38.

As the appointed regulator of the postal market, with clear duties and daily responsibility for regulation, no body is better placed than the commission to weigh up the merits of an entry in the register and, in keeping the register, to decide what is in the public interest. The clause provides adequate safeguards, and I hope that the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) will not press amendment No. 74.

As for the hon. Gentleman's argument on homeless people, originally, the Bill required the commission to have regard in its work to certain groups of consumers. However, the point was clearly made that that requirement should be imposed also on the consumer council in doing its work. Government Amendment No. 14 provides for such a requirement.

Opposition Members have used that provision to revisit the argument about why homeless people should be grouped with those who are disabled or chronically sick, those who are of pensionable age, those who have low incomes and those who reside in rural areas. The Committee rejected the proposal not because it was hard-hearted or unconcerned about the perils of homelessness, but because, first, the list of those to whom our provision applies is not prescriptive. Moreover, the end of Government amendment No. 14 provides that the list

> is not to be taken as implying that regard may not be had to the interests of other descriptions of persons.

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

Secondly, the groups that we have identified all have specific problems in receiving post office network services. Those problems have been communicated to us by various organisations and charities representing those groups. Therefore, for those who are disabled or chronically sick, there is the "articles for the blind" service, in which any item up to 7 kg can be sent free of charge anywhere in the world. Those who are of pensionable age sometimes have problems in collecting their pension from the post office network. The universal tariff is provided to ensure that postal services are accessible to everyone, including those who are on low incomes. Those who reside in rural areas have particular problems in receiving postal services.

We have had no reports of homeless people having problems with postal services. Neither Centrepoint, Shelter nor any of the other charities involved with the homeless have advanced the type of argument made today by the hon. Member for South–West Hertfordshire. They have not said that providing homeless people with a post office box number is part of the solution in assisting those who sleep rough on the streets, particularly the streets of London.

The Government's approach to a solution—on which I think there is a broad, cross-party consensus—is that the first step is to get homeless people off the streets, not to encourage a street life style. Many of those people have serious problems, whether it is with alcohol abuse, drug abuse, or something else. If we are to tackle those problems, we have to get homeless people off the streets.

Anyone can have a poste restante address or a post office address. Moreover, once a homeless person is in a hostel, he or she will have a postal address at which he can receive benefits and other post.

As we said in Committee, we would not be assisting the homeless by including them in the Bill's provisions and by saying that both the commission and the council have a duty to provide postal addresses for the homeless. Such a provision would encourage a street life style and achieve precisely the opposite to the sentiments expressed by the hon. Gentleman.

Therefore, as the Government said in Committee, the House can safely oppose the proposal without being seen to be cruel or heartless. The hon. Gentleman's arguments, both today and in Committee, simply do not stand up. I should be very surprised if Conservative Members pushed those arguments in a proper debate on how to tackle homelessness. We are addressing that in the Bill, and the hon. Gentleman's comments were unimpressive. I urge the House to rejects amendments Nos. 70 and 74.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 2, in page 18, line 29, at end insert—

'(1A) The requirements of this subsection are that the Commission shall—

(a) give notice of the proposed modifications to the Council, and

(b) consider any representations made in accordance with the notice and not withdrawn.'.

No. 3, in page 18, line 30, after "requirements", insert "of this subsection".

No. 4, in page 18, line 34, leave out "The notice" and insert—

'A notice under subsection (1A) or (2)'.

No. 5, in page 18, line 37, leave out "publication of the notice'and insert—

'the giving of the notice under subsection (1A) or (as the case may be) the publication of the notice under subsection (2)'.

No. 6, in page 19, line 13, at end insert—

'(7A) If, after giving notice under subsection (1A), the Commission decides not to make a final order or confirm a provisional order, it shall give notice of that decision to the licence holder concerned and the Council.'.

No. 7, in page 19, line 13, at end insert—

'(7B) A notice under subsection (1A) shall be given by serving a copy of the notice on the Council and a notice under subsection (7A) shall be given by serving a copy of the notice on the licence holder and the Council.'.

No. 8, in page 19, line 14, leave out "A" and insert "Any other".—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 38

REGISTER

Amendment made: No. 9, in page 24, line 40, leave out "variation" and insert "modification".—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 41

DUTIES IN RELATION TO PUBLIC POST OFFICES.

Amendment made: No. 34, in page 27, line 17, leave out "section" and insert "Act".—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 43

REVIEW AND INFORMATION.

Amendments made: No. 10, in page 28, line 10, after "Kingdom", insert ", other member States".

No. 11, in page 28, line 12, after "Kingdom", insert ", other member States".

No. 35, in page 28, leave out lines 30 to 32.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 53

EXERCISE OF FUNCTIONS: GENERAL.

Amendments made: No. 12, in page 33, line 38, after "functions" insert—

'in relation to relevant postal services'.

No. 13, in page 33, line 40, leave out—

'and matters affecting their different interests'.

No. 14, in page 33, line 41, at end insert—

'( ) The Council shall, in exercising its functions, have regard to the interests of—

(a) individuals who are disabled or chronically sick,

(b) individuals of pensionable age,

(c) individuals with low incomes, and

(d) individuals residing in rural areas,

but that is not to be taken as implying that regard may not be had to the interests of other descriptions of persons.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 62

GOVERNMENT HOLDING IN THE POST OFFICE COMPANY AND ITS SUBSIDIARIES

Mr. Alan Johnson: I beg to move amendment No. 15, in page 39, line 10, after "its", insert "wholly owned".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 16 to 18.

Amendment No. 78, in clause 66, page 41, line 21, at end insert—

'( ) the effect of the proposed issue or disposal would be that no more than 10 per cent. of the total share capital of the Post Office company at the time of the transfer would have been disposed of.'.

Government amendments Nos. 79 to 81.

Mr. Johnson: The amendments provide further evidence that the Government are sticking to our commitment to keep the new Post Office company and its relevant subsidiaries within public ownership by ensuring that we allow only a narrow portal for share sales or swaps, while allowing it greater commercial freedom.

Amendment No. 16 plugs a potential loophole in the restrictions on the disposal of shares in subsidiaries carrying out the core business by applying the restrictions on the disposal of shares to any subsidiaries owning shares in a relevant subsidiary.

Amendment No. 15 amends clause 62 and seeks to ensure that the Government do not prejudice the rights of any external shareholders in the subsidiaries of the Post Office company by restricting the Secretary of State's power to direct subsidiaries of the Post Office company to issue shares to subsidiaries which are wholly owned.

Amendment No. 17 is a minor drafting amendment to bring the wording of clause 65(3) into line with that of the new subsection (5).

Amendment No. 18 supports the Government's policy of allowing the Post Office greater commercial freedom by allowing the Post Office company and its subsidiaries flexibility to reorganise its structure as it thinks fit. It relaxes the restriction in subsection (2) of clause 65 on the disposal of shares or share rights in a relevant subsidiary by the Post Office company, any of the subsidiaries or their nominees to allow disposal among themselves. Again, there is no harm in the shares being passed round in this way, as each of the parties concerned is subject to the restrictions on disposing of shares to a third party. There is great benefit, because it allows the company flexibility in its structure.

Amendments Nos. 79, 80 and 81 are technical amendments which bring the provisions in those clauses into line with each other.

Amendment No. 79 to clause 69 adds a provision requiring the Secretary of State to consult the Post Office company before exercising his powers to extinguish any of its liabilities and to consult the Post Office company and the subsidiary in question if any of a subsidiary's liabilities are to be extinguished.

Amendment No. 80 provides power for the Secretary of State to make an order to repeal the clause when its purpose is spent. This power mirrors the provision in clause 73 which provides for the Secretary of State to make an order to repeal clause 73 when its purpose is spent.

Amendment No. 81 removes the requirement in clause 73(7) to consult the Post Office if an order is to be made to repeal the section under subsection (6).

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Who drafted these amendments, and why is it necessary to introduce them at this stage? Has the Bill been improperly drafted? Does it reflect Ministers' desires and objectives? Why are we being subjected to this long list of tiny amendments that should have been taken care of in the original drafting of the Bill?

Mr. Johnson: It is not a long list at all. On Second Reading, Opposition Front Benchers were suggesting that there would be over 1,000 amendments. In fact, there were 185, of which only 80 have been Government amendments. I am not as experienced in this place as the hon. Gentleman, but I understand that that number of amendments compares very well with Bills under the previous Government.

9.45 pm

I also make the point that the Post Office is the Methuselah of public sector industries, because it has been publicly owned since 1631, and there is a lot of legislation to tidy up when making changes to the Post Office. I assure the House that I would have preferred not to have had so many amendments this evening, but these are minor, technical amendments and I have ensured that Opposition Front Benchers have been kept informed about our changes.

As I was saying, there is no need to consult the Post Office in the same way if we intend to repeal the clause, as the repeal would not affect it in the same way as the creation of debt.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I wish to speak to amendment No. 78 and give an assurance to my hon. Friend the Minister, who is suffering from a heavy cold, that I will not press it to a Division. Amendment No. 78 would affect clause 66, which will enable a partial share sale in the Post Office company to further a joint venture or a partnership. However, no limit is set on the volume of shares that may be sold. As a result, any amount of the Post Office company could be sold off.

As my hon. Friend the Minister has said, we obviously wish to ensure that we fulfil our policy of maintaining the Post Office company within the public sector. That is why we need clarity with regard to clause 66. There are concerns that the Government have not tabled an amendment, as requested in Committee, to limit the amount of shares that could be sold. For example, amendment No. 78 suggests a 10 per cent. maximum. The Government argument has been that that would restrict commercial flexibility and the room to manoeuvre of the company in cementing joint venture deals. However, the Post Office itself, in its evidence to the Select Committee, suggested that that problem would be highly unlikely to arise.

[Mr. John McDonnell]

There have been joint ventures and share swaps elsewhere, but they have been restricted to the 5 per cent. level. That has happened occasionally in the telecommunications industry, and has never involved a share swap of more than 10 per cent. France Telecom and Deutsche Telecom, for example, had a swap agreement that involved a 5 per cent. exchange of shares only.

The Government's legislative proposals arise from a Labour party conference motion that stated that there must be no uncertainty or ambiguity, now or in the future, about the commitment of a Labour Government to the continued public ownership of the Post Office. Clause 66, as drafted, is inconsistent with the spirit of that motion. It will raise doubts among the workers in the Post Office and among the electorate about our commitment to the public ownership of the Post Office in the long term. It gives the wrong signals to those in the industry and to the electorate.

I am aware that, today, further talks have gone on that may resolve the problem, and therefore I urge the Government to table a clear amendment on the issue in the other place to prevent any back-door threat to the public ownership of the Post Office.

Mr. Johnson: It must be borne in mind that, at the time of the Labour party conference last year, the issue of share sales to cement an alliance or a joint venture had not arisen. We have ensured that, if any future Government wish to sell shares in the Post Office, that would require primary legislation. However, we recognise that the communications industry is heading towards further globalisation.

I can put it no better than the Communication Workers Union, which is very perceptive on such issues. It has said:

> Mail services have been seen as predominantly domestic markets met by national operators. However, the growth of international mail, the opportunities for e-mail and developments in the parcels market are all leading to a more international marketplace that is likely to be dominated by a small number of global players or alliances. The British Post Office cannot afford to stand apart from such powerful trends.

The CWU understands that full well. The point about saying that any future share sales would require primary legislation, except in the case of share swaps to cement a joint venture or an alliance, is to ensure that the Post Office has greater commercial freedom in the public sector.

Our battle in the early 1990s was not to maintain the status quo but to give the Post Office genuine commercial freedom in the public sector. That freedom will allow the British Post Office to move with the major international players. Our competitors have had the same freedom for many years.

Mr. McDonnell: The CWU has stated today:

> In our view, the current open-ended nature of Clause 66 is inconsistent with the spirit of the Labour party motion at the conference and, if the Government persists in the current wording, it is bound to raise doubts in the minds of Labour Party members and Labour voters as to the commitment of the Labour Government to the public ownership of the Post Office.

Mr. Johnson: The issue at last year's conference was the monopoly limit and not joint ventures and acquisitions.

I know exactly what the CWU position is, but it is stated on the face of the Bill that Governments cannot bring proposals forward to divest shares. Only the Post Office can do that.

The Post Office begins the process when it makes a proposal to the Secretary of State. If the Secretary of State is convinced that that is in the best commercial interests of the Post Office, he or she will put it forward for affirmative vote in both Houses of Parliament.

Post Office Acts come along only every 15 or 20 years. For example, such Acts were passed in 1953, 1969 and 1981. We cannot be tied to an arbitrary share limit—whether it be 5 or 10 per cent.—that will prevent the Post Office from securing a joint venture or alliance that is wanted by its work force, the Government and by the business itself. If we were so tied, we would have to ask the major market player with which we might be negotiating a deal to hang on for a couple of years until a slot appeared in the Queen's Speech for the necessary primary legislation. That would cause the deal to be lost, which would not be in the best interests of the work force or of the business.

Mr. McDonnell: I believe that we should listen to the work force. The CWU statement today was in support of the 10 per cent. limit.

Mr. Johnson: The triple lock that we have on the mechanism means that it would be senseless to impose an arbitrary figure, but in fact the situation is worse than that.

Hon. Members from all parties—including the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), whom I see in his place—opposed the privatisation of the Post Office. We said that there was a way a forward that would allow genuine commercial freedom in the public sector. If the Government diluted or inhibited that commercial freedom by placing caps on joint ventures or acquisitions, that would leave us open to the argument that the only way to deliver commercial freedom was by privatisation. In other words, that would destroy the argument that Labour Members have supported for the past eight or nine years.

The Government have looked at ways to resolve the concerns expressed by CWU members, and we have studied the provision of a special share. However, mergers will take place at the level not of the Post Office holding company, but of the subsidiaries. That is why amendment No. 78 would not have had the effect that its supporters wanted.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have given the Minister considerable latitude, as I understand that he is addressing an argument to hon. Members on the Benches behind him, but equally he should be addressing me at the same time.

Mr. Johnson: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I have been listening to the Minister's argument, and to the answer that he has given to the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) who, as I am sure the House understands, is clearly seeking to represent the best interests of the Post Office work force. Will the Minister say that the changes that these Government amendments bring about not only safeguard the position of the employees, the interests of the Post Office and the

interests of Government but, more than that, represent the interests of the consumer who is served by the Post Office? If the Minister could give us that assurance, we would be much happier with his brief explanation.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, I can give that assurance. This series of amendments establishes the definition of relevant subsidiaries. Following a report from the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, we went to the extent of ensuring that future Governments could not get around the block on selling shares in the Post Office by putting them into one of its subsidiaries, such as German Parcel, one of the organisations that it purchased recently, by defining what is a relevant subsidiary. So there is no way around this.

Mr. McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Johnson: No, I am not giving way again.

My final point is that, if anyone seriously wanted to privatise the Post Office, they would not go down the tortuous route of exchanging swaps and joint ventures. There is no money for the Exchequer in floating shares on the stock exchange. All those shares will, in a sense, be undervalued because they are used to secure an alliance or joint venture. They will not be worth their full weight.

All the arguments suggest, as they did last July, that our proposals in the White Paper and the Bill represent the way forward in terms of genuine commercial freedom in the public sector.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 16, in page 39, line 46, leave out "in this subsection" and insert—

'any other subsidiary of the Post Office company which holds shares or share rights in, or is connected to, any such subsidiary.

( ) For the purposes of subsection (8), a subsidiary of the Post Office company is connected to another such subsidiary which falls within any of paragraphs (a) to (d) of that subsection ("the operating subsidiary") if it forms part of a chain of subsidiaries of the Post Office company which leads to the operating subsidiary and which is identified by the fact that each member of the chain holds shares or share rights in the next subsidiary in the chain.

( ) In subsection (8)'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Clause 65

RESTRICTION ON DISPOSALS OF SHARES TO THIRD PARTIES

Amendments made: No. 17, in page 40, line 37, leave out "such person" and insert—

'person falling within this subsection'.

No. 18, in page 40, line 37, at end insert—

'( ) Subsection (2) does not apply in relation to any disposal by the Post Office company, any subsidiary of that company or any nominee of the company or subsidiary to any other person falling within this subsection.'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Clause 69

EXTINGUISHMENT OF CERTAIN LIABILITIES

Amendments made: No. 79, in page 43, line 16, at end insert—

'( ) Before exercising any power under subsection (1) or (2) in relation to liabilities of the Post Office company, the Secretary of State shall consult that company.

( ) Before exercising any power under subsection (1) or (2) in relation to liabilities of a subsidiary of the Post Office company, the Secretary of State shall consult the Post Office company and the subsidiary.'.

No. 80, in page 43, line 16, at end insert—

'( ) The Secretary of State may by order repeal this section.'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Clause 73

FURTHER PROVISIONS RELATING TO THE CAPITAL STRUCTURE OF THE POST OFFICE COMPANY

Amendment made: No. 81, in page 46, line 4, after "power" insert—

'(other than the power under subsection (6))'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Clause 93

INVIOLABILITY OF MAILS

Amendments made: No. 36, in page 55, line 26, after "customs" insert "or excise".

No. 37, in page 55, line 27, leave out—

'16 of the Post Office Act 1953'

and insert—

'*(Application of customs and excise enactments to certain postal packets)*'.

No. 38, in page 55, line 30, leave out "17 of that Act" and insert—

'*(Power to detain postal packets containing contraband)*'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Clause 97

CERTAIN EXEMPTIONS FROM POSTAGE ETC.

Amendments made: No. 19, in page 57, line 31, at end insert—

', a member of the National Assembly for Wales'.

No. 20, in page 57, line 38, after "Parliament", insert—

', the National Assembly for Wales'.

No. 21, in page 57, line 40, after "Parliament", insert—

', a member of the National Assembly for Wales'.

No. 22, in page 58, line 10, after second "Parliament" insert—

', the National Assembly for Wales'.—*[Mr. Alan Johnson.]*

Clause 105

THE POSTCODE ADDRESS FILE

Mr. Page: I beg to move amendment No. 75, in page 62, line 16, at end insert—

'and—

(c) make provision for any person to seek and secure any reasonable correction in their details.'

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 76, in page 62, line 16, at end insert—

'(1A) In the File—

(a) each address shall reflect the county in which the addressee resides, except in as much as the efficiency of sorting addresses near county boundaries requires reference to a neighbouring county on the official address; and

(b) each address shall include a county.'.

Mr. Page: I hope that the Minister appreciated the fact that I did not intrude into private grief a few moments ago. I shall simply say that there is greater joy in heaven over a sinner that repenteth.

These amendments are really the brainchild of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan). He has an enthusiasm for them that transcends anything else in the Bill other than the issue of homelessness, which the Minister so brutally dismissed. The knowledge that his amendment has been accepted will speed my hon. Friend's recovery and have him leaping from his sick bed with joy if the Minister is generous enough to accept it.

I will not take too long in going over these proposals, as they speak for themselves. Amendment No. 75, which would make provision for any person to seek and secure any reasonable correction in their details, is simple and straightforward. The postcode address file is what it appears to be—a database of addresses. It is rare for a name to be on the file, as the Minister pointed out in Committee, and it must be as accurate as possible.

I welcome the provision to allow access to the information that is held by the Post Office. As it is in the interests of the Post Office and of individuals for that information to be accurate, it is sensible to allow people to seek and secure reasonable corrections if the details held are wrong. I shall be intrigued to know whether the Minister can find any objection to the amendment.

Amendment No. 76 makes the relatively simple point that the postcode address should reflect the county in which the addressee resides. I understand the point made by the Minister previously—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Postal Services Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

As amended in the Standing Committee, again considered.

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mr. Page: As I was saying, I understand the point made previously by the Minister that postcodes have not hitherto reflected the counties in which people live and that there would have to be significant changes to the records kept by the Post Office. Given the problems that have arisen in recent years and computer projects in the public sector, I have some feeling for its nervousness in contemplating change. However, I can see no good reason why county affiliation should not be recognised and accepted throughout postal services as part of the postcode address file.

The Minister was good enough to explain to the Committee on 21 March how insistent he has been in including "East Yorkshire" on his outgoing mail from his constituency in Hull. He explained that invariably he lets his bank or building society know that he lives in that county. What is good enough for the Minister in his constituency as a constituency Member and as a private individual should be good enough for the postcode address file. I look forward to what the Minister has to say—

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Page: I am bringing my remarks to a close. I would far prefer the hon. Gentleman to address his remarks to the Minister, who is an expert on how the postcode file works.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in support of amendment No. 76. I never thought, given my experience of the House, that I would agree wholeheartedly with an amendment promoted by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan). I wish him well after his hospital treatment.

I support the amendment because there is a great deal of irritation in my constituency of Ynys Môn that the name of the county is not recognised on the current database held by the Post Office. Only today, I was replying to a letter from one of my constituents who shares that irritation intensely.

The Post Office database carries in Wales the names of the counties prior to reorganisation in 1996. People in Anglesey do not like to continue to receive their letters with the county name of Gwynedd. That county, as it was then constructed, was abolished in 1996. Gwynedd is now a much smaller county. A similar situation exists in other parts of Wales. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) will have letters addressed to Dyfed and not to Ceredigion.

We are told by the Post Office that it is no longer necessary to have the county name on a letter. All that is needed is the post town and the postcode. So why are the old counties on the Post Office database? We are told that it would be far too expensive to change the database. We are told also that in a few years time, the Post Office will be changing all the databases and removing all the county names.

Historic county names are extremely important. People retain an affection for their counties. In an area such as Anglesey, which is an island, people are independently minded and want their letters addressed to them as the people of Anglesey. We are asking the Minister only to recognise that there is strong feeling on this issue. It is a small matter for the Government to accept, but to do so would make many people happy.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I mirror the views expressed by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) because, as with his constituency, amendment No. 76 relates to my proud county of Cheshire. It is a very ancient county. Indeed, the Earl of Chester is a member of our royal family—[*Interruption.*] I am coming to postcodes.

The county name means a great deal to many people. I shall go a little further than did the hon. Member for Ynys Môn by saying that insurance companies often set

lower premiums for some counties than for others. A constituent of mine who lives in or near the village of Kettleshulme who loses "Cheshire" from his or her address may be included in Greater Manchester—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] "Oh!" indeed—the matter is important. In Greater Manchester, the insurance premiums are higher. A cost is involved for such people, irrespective of the great affection in which most people hold the county in which they live.

I am not up to scratch on exactly how postcodes are worked out, but if the postcode rather than the county is the critical factor, the Post Office could stick to the postcode but leave the county.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: How does the amendment apply to Scotland, where counties ceased to exist in 1975? Nearer to the hon. Gentleman's home, how would it apply to areas of Lancashire that were transferred into Cheshire at that time? Would people be given a choice?

Mr. Winterton: The debates of the 1970s on local government reorganisation created considerable splits within political parties across the House. People took mixed views on the proposals of that time. I shall certainly not seek to intervene in matters internal to Scotland, irrespective of my view on devolution, which is not, as you will quickly remind me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, part of this debate.

The hon. Gentleman referred to Lancashire, and considerable feeling remains to this day about the areas of Lancashire which were transferred into what is known as Greater Manchester.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): My hon. Friend has referred to Scotland, so he may wish to know that people who live in Berwickshire may have a Berwick–upon–Tweed postcode and address. In that case, these matters may cross a national frontier.

Mr. Winterton: I am not sure whether this is relevant, but I had the honour to Chair a sitting in Westminster Hall at which matters relating to regional aid in Berwickshire and Berwick–upon–Tweed were discussed at some length. I understand the problems relating to the border in that area. I shall not try your patience, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but my hon. Friend clearly made an important point.

I consider the two amendments eminently sensible, reasonable and rational. They could add to the attraction of the Bill by meeting the needs of many people who feel great loyalty to the county in which they live. I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who is currently in hospital, a speedy recovery, and I hope that the Minister will aid that recovery by conceding the amendments and granting the House an opportunity to be parochial, but parochial in the interests of the people whom we serve.

Mr. Baldry: Those of us who served on the Standing Committee became experts on the postcode system. To the possible surprise of the Minister, we spent almost as much time debating it as we did debating the Post Office monopoly. The reason for that—another surprise for the Minister, I suspect—was that there were concerns on both sides of the Committee about the working of the postcode system.

To his credit, the Minister took a wholly logical approach to the subject: all that mattered was the postal town and the postcode. All the members of the Committee understood that—it was perfectly rational and logical and perfectly well explained. The trouble is that matters do not work out like that on the ground.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), who was an Opposition Whip on the Bill, explained several problems relating to postcodes and postal addresses in his constituency. The hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) explained that, although part of her constituency was in Gloucestershire, it had a Welsh postcode and address, which caused considerable confusion.

The matter provides an interesting test of the extent to which the Minister has discussed with the Post Office the concerns expressed by Members on both sides of the House. Has he had an opportunity to discuss those concerns? Even though he might not want to propose or accept an amendment, has he been able to find a pragmatic solution to improve the situation?

The matter was not wholly fanciful, nor was it solely confined to Rutland—the concerns were shared by all members of the Committee. We devoted a considerable number of our sittings to the discussion of those problems, with no repetition or filibustering. Real concerns were expressed on both sides of the Committee. I hope that the Minister has had the opportunity to discuss them with the Post Office and that he can give the House some information on how they can be pragmatically addressed.

Mr. Alan Johnson: The matter was the subject of passionate debate in Committee. If the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) has had his appendix removed, I am sure it has a postcode on it. He was still seething about events that occurred in the early 1970s—as are many other hon. Members.

Let us get that matter straight. The Post Office is not responsible for the changes introduced by the Government of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) in the early 1970s, who moved Slough from Buckinghamshire to Berkshire and Bournemouth from Hampshire to Dorset, and introduced the county of Humberside—that was never warmly received in my neck of the woods. All those changes had nothing to do with the Post Office.

Similarly, some people believe that the Post Office is responsible for numbering and naming roads and streets. It is not. If it were, the sequences would be much more logical. As we are all aware when we go canvassing, No. 2 can be followed by No. 23. Such issues are not the responsibility of the Post Office.

Clause 105 would ensure that the postcode address file was maintained and made available to those who wanted to use it. That provision has unleashed much passion. I have already taken the matter up with the Post Office, but I shall briefly explain that the postcode is the Post Office's system of routing mail through the new automated equipment. Only the post town and the postcode are needed, thus for this place SW1 is the outward code and OAA is the inward code. That is

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

all the Post Office needs. Anyone can put the county name on his letters if he wants to do so. That is fine. The Post Office does not say that county names are not allowed.

Mr. Drew: All the counties would have to be Tipp-Exed off the envelopes.

Mr. Johnson: That would create a few more jobs in the Post Office.

To insist that the Post Office must go to the enormous expense of adding a superfluous element to the postcode, which is not needed, would be over-prescriptive.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): The Minister said that only the postcode and the postal address were needed. In that case, why has the Post Office in Wales admitted that envelopes addressed in Welsh—even when they include the postcode—take longer to arrive than those addressed in English?

10.15 pm

Mr. Johnson: That is one question that I absolutely cannot answer. I will take it up with the Post Office.

Counties are very important to people. We understand that; the issue is laden with emotion. However, although we may be prepared to use a county name in our addresses, it is a big step from that to insisting that the Post Office keeps superfluous information on a postcode address file that this legislation would give it a duty to maintain, at considerable expense.

What I will do to address the point raised by the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) is continue my discussions with the Post Office. I shall ask about the point that was raised by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones)—the suggestion that all Welsh county names will be abolished by the end of the year. I shall also raise the point that was, I believe, the original catalyst for the debate—the argument that people who have the wrong postcode find it difficult to get it changed because there is a horrendous system of bureaucracy to go through, which is not useful to the Post Office as it means that mail is delayed because the wrong postcode is used.

I will take up those issues, but I ask hon. Members—

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Will the Minister respond to the argument that sometimes insurance companies take the Post Office address as the formal address, and that that address might suggest that a residence is in an area where it is not? It might be described as being in Greater Manchester, when it is not. Although I have great regard for Manchester, that great second city of our country, there could be financial implications. If people want their county to be displayed on their address, is it right that a service provider such as the Post Office should tell them, "That is superfluous as far as we are concerned, and you can't have it"? Should not the Post Office serve the public?

Mr. Johnson: The Post Office is not saying that the use of county names will delay the mail, or that it is prohibited. People are perfectly entitled to use a county name in the address. The point is that the Post Office does not need the county name for the postcode address file. It is unnecessary to insist that it puts superfluous information into the file.

I shall send a copy of the *Hansard* of this debate to the chief executive of the Post Office tomorrow to further our discussions on solving some of these problems. I ask the Opposition to withdraw the amendment, but if they press it to a Division I hope that hon. Members will vote against it.

Mr. Page: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), lying on his sickbed, will be delighted by the passion that his amendments have raised. Representations have come from Wales, Scotland, northern England, middle England and southern England. However, I shall keep the Minister's uncaring, unfeeling response from my hon. Friend in case it inhibits his recovery. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 109

ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 39, in page 63, line 44, after "order" insert—

', or of the Treasury to make regulations,'.

No. 40, in page 64, line 1, after "order" insert—

', or of the Treasury to make regulations,'.

No. 41, in page 64, line 6, after "State" insert—

'or (as the case may be) the Treasury'.

No. 42, in page 64, line 16, at end insert—

'( ) The power of the Secretary of State under section (*Subsidy for public post offices*) as extended by this section may be exercised by modifying any enactment.'.

No. 43, in page 64, line 16, at end insert—

'( ) Regulations under section (*Application of customs and excise enactments to certain postal packets*) shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of the House of Commons.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Mr. Alan Johnson: I beg to move amendment No. 82, in page 64, line 19, leave out—

'and paragraph 2 of Schedule 3'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 83 to 88.

Mr. Johnson: Amendments Nos. 82, 83, 85, 86 and 88 preserve existing pension rights in the various pension schemes—of which there are many in the Post Office, some dating from civil service days. They protect those pension rights and transfer them across to the new Post Office company. Amendments Nos. 84 and 87 concern third-party dealings with the Post Office company in respect of land, and remove the burden on the third party to inquire whether Treasury consent to any previous dealings with the land was needed, or, if it was needed, whether it was given.

These are technical amendments, which I do not think will raise much controversy. They protect the pension rights of all those working within the Post Office.

Mr. Forth: That is all very well, but the Minister has not even begun to explain why the apparently simple and

straightforward part of the schedule that the amendment seeks to replace has to be replaced. Presumably, if the Minister were of a mind to do so, he could explain what was defective in the original wording, which I thought was self-explanatory. It would appear that there was something sufficiently defective in six lines of text for them to be replaced by the substantial wording before us, particularly in amendment No. 83.

It is an old trick by Ministers, which I have come across over the years—and officials know this as well—to slip the word "technical" into an explanation, or lack of explanation, thinking that that will lull the House into a false sense of security and all will be well. You and I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have been around for long enough to know that that is not always the case, and that the use of the word "technical" is not sufficient to explain the replacement of six rather simple and elegant lines of text with the very long, complicated wording in amendment No. 83 and the other amendments.

It does not do the Minister or the House justice for him to expect to slide over the matter in that way. We need to know with more precision what was wrong with the previous words that required them to be replaced by this lengthy and complicated text. What is in the detail of amendment No. 83 that should give more reassurance to those for whom we have the greatest concern, the employees, with regard to their accumulated pension rights? Why was it felt necessary to go to this length of detail, unless there may have been something wrong, something rather sinister, lurking in the background that required reassurance of this length and this description for the employees involved?

An answer to that question is the very least that we could expect at this stage, not a muttering about "technical", and not a superficiality of the kind that the Minister seems to have picked up very quickly. It is one thing for old ministerial lags to get away with that sort of thing, but from a fresh-faced new boy of the type that we have before us today I find it rather shocking.

All that I wanted to do, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and I will not presume upon your patience any longer—was to give the Minister an opportunity to shine on this occasion, to put him through his paces and let him show his mastery of the amendment so that he could explain to us, but, more important, to the people most affected, what it is that he believes this will do that the previous wording did not do.

Mr. Johnson: I suppose that when I become an old lag I shall follow the right hon. Gentleman's example. He has made fleeting visits to the Chamber during this debate. He came in halfway through the debate on new clause 1, raised a number of points—having not even heard the opening speech by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—and then disappeared before my right hon. Friend had a chance to reply. Now he comes and raises not a single point on the amendments, but instead asks why we have to remove elegant wording on page 75.

I note that the question does not come from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen, who know full well that throughout the Committee stage we explained that those measures were there temporarily so that we could carry forward a whole host of issues that are very complicated, as pension matters are. I advise hon. Members to read *Hansard*. I cannot understand why anyone would not have read the *Hansard* report of the Committee stage by now. We explained that we could not just leave the position on the basis of that simple wording. We need to ensure that the people who work in the business, who are part of about six or seven different pension schemes, are assured—*[Interruption.]* We will see how quickly letters on the Bill arrive. We need to ensure that people are assured to every last dot and comma that their positions are safeguarded. That is the purpose of the amendments, which I hope the House will support.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 44, in page 64, line 21, after "91" insert—

'*(Subsidy for public post offices)*,'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 111

GENERAL FINANCIAL PROVISION

Amendment made: No. 45, in page 64, line 29, at end insert—

'( ) any expenditure incurred by the Commission in consequence of this Act,'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 113

INDEX OF DEFINED EXPRESSIONS

Amendment made: No. 46, in page 67, line 35, at end insert—

'Public post office Section 41(3)'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Clause 115

MODIFICATION OF LOCAL ENACTMENTS ETC.

Amendment made: No. 47, in page 68, line 10, leave out—

', or in any instrument or other document,'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

New Schedule 1

TRANSFER TO THE POST OFFICE COMPANY: TAX

Corporation tax: general

1. The Post Office company shall, on and after the appointed day, be treated for all purposes of corporation tax as if it were the same person as the Post Office.

Shares and other securities

2. Any share issued by the Post Office company or any of its wholly owned subsidiaries in pursuance of section 62 shall be treated for the purposes of the Corporation Tax Acts as if it had been issued wholly in consideration of a subscription paid to the company concerned of an amount equal to the nominal value of the share.

3. Any security (other than a share) issued by the Post Office company or any of its wholly owned subsidiaries in pursuance of section 62 or 73 shall be treated for the purposes of the Corporation Tax Acts as if it had been issued wholly in consideration of a loan made to the company concerned of an amount equal to the principal sum payable under the security.

Transfer arrangements

4. The existence or exercise of the powers of the Secretary of State under section 61 shall not be regarded as constituting or creating arrangements within the meaning of section 410 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 (arrangements for the transfer of a company to another group or consortium).

Tax–free benefits

5. Nothing in this Part and nothing done under it shall be regarded as a scheme or arrangement for the purposes of section 30 of the Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 (tax–free benefits).

Assets acquired by the Post Office in 1969

6. The Act of 1992 shall apply in relation to a disposal by the Post Office company of an asset acquired by the Post Office by virtue of Part III of the Post Office Act 1969 as if the acquisition or provision of the asset by the Crown had been the acquisition or provision of it by the Post Office company.

Stamp duty

7. No transfer effected by virtue of section 61 shall give rise to any liability to stamp duty.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Remaining Government amendments agreed to.

Order for Third Reading read.—[Queen's Consent, on behalf of the Crown, signified.]

10.26 pm

Mr. Byers: I beg to move That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am sure that all Members of the House would like to thank those Members who served on the Standing Committee that scrutinised the Bill's detail. In particular, we thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) and the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) who chaired the Committee's proceedings fairly and efficiently. I add my personal thanks to my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness who was responsible for taking the Bill through Committee. It was the first time that he has taken a Bill through Committee, and I have been very pleased at the way that he was able to conduct business and take through Government proposals. I know that all members of the Committee enjoyed the opportunity of engaging in lively and, I hope, constructive debate.

The Bill is part of the Government's programme of modernisation and reform. As hon. Members will know from this evening's debates, it provides opportunities to preserve the national network of sub-post offices and to ensure that there will be a national network that can be supported, if necessary, through the scheme for providing a subsidy to which the House agreed this evening.

We will, through the access criteria, ensure that all people in all parts of the country have access to postal services. We will also be able to ensure that the post office network can plan for a future based on diversity and investment in computerisation and that it can ensure that post offices can meet not just the needs of postal services, but of the communities that they serve.

The Bill guarantees a publicly owned Post Office, but with the commercial freedoms that will be needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. It will be able to compete and have the money to invest in the future. By reducing the cut that is taken by the Treasury, we will provide the Post Office, for the first time, with access to the funds that it will need for investment to ensure that it can develop its services.

In the past, under the previous Government, the Treasury, rather than the Post Office, was always treated as a priority. Under this Government, the Treasury is withdrawing from the control that it has over finance, and resources will be provided to the Post Office for the first time. That ensures that, when we talk about commercial freedoms, it is not just rhetoric; we are also providing resources to make the Post Office's commercial freedom a reality.

The Bill will lift the uncertainty under which the Post Office has had to live for far too long. It will provide a firm basis for competition in the postal services market and it will provide a better deal for consumers, including those who are socially disadvantaged. It will ensure a strong Post Office that is better able to serve all its customers in all parts of the country. I invite the House to support the Bill on Third Reading.

10.29 pm

Mr. Page: As the House knows, the Opposition moved a reasoned amendment to the Second Reading motion for the Bill because

it introduces an unsatisfactory structure of ownership which falls short of granting full commercial freedom, introduces uncompetitive borrowing criteria and does not include provision for transparent accounting practices, imposes new burdens of regulation on private companies rather than encouraging competition and fails to introduce clear access criteria to protect the network of sub Post Offices.—[*Official Report*, 15 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 815.]

The House will be fully aware that we had a long debate on the last point under Government new clause 1, at the start of this evening's proceedings. That debate proved the depth of concern felt by so many hon. Members. Now that the Committee and Report stages have concluded, we look to the other place to introduce appropriate amendments to inject common sense into the Bill.

I echo the Secretary of State by congratulating the Minister for Competitiveness on the friendly, open way in which he has conducted affairs. I do not want to damage his career prospects, but I must point out that promotion in the Department of Trade and Industry seems a distinct possibility. I did not find him very accommodating with our amendments, but we cannot have too much at once.

When the Secretary of State told the House on 15 February, on Second Reading, that he knew how many amendments he would table, we little realised that he was not joking. Despite all the spin and gloss that he has just put on the Bill in his speech, saying that it will be marvellous, it is most unsatisfactory that, on Report, we should have been debating important issues that affect people's livelihoods, as we did in our discussion of new clause 1. That was bounced on the House without our having the opportunity to take a long, measured look at what it implies.

A pattern is emerging. We have had the shambles of the Utilities Bill, which has just completed its Committee stage and will be before us tomorrow. We have lost count of the hundreds of amendments that the Government have tabled. That is the hallmark of a Department that is out of control. The fact that new clause 1 was tabled at such a late stage shows that it is a panic measure, introduced simply to try to satisfy last Wednesday's mass lobby.

We have had several debates on the Post Office in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall, and they concentrated on the sub-post offices. That point was emphasised by two debates last Wednesday. Those debates and today's proceedings highlight the confusion and muddle in the

Government and the apparent lack of leadership by the Secretary of State. I might be doing the right hon. Gentleman a disservice, but despite all his rhetoric, I think that he would have preferred privatisation to the fudged solution provided by the Bill. Perhaps even this new Labour Government, with their vast majority, still have no stomach for that.

We can get a little distant from the subject matter in our debates, and it is useful to remind ourselves of the sheer size of the postal services and their importance to our economy. There are four main operating arms: Royal Mail, Parcelforce, Post Office Counters Ltd. and the subscriptions services. The Post Office employs more than 190,000 people and has a turnover in excess of £6.7 billion. However, we have said again and again, including on Report a few moments ago, that there is increasingly serious competition from overseas rivals as well as pressures from fax and electronic mail services. With all that comes the prospect of greater liberalisation in the European Union.

It has been clear for some time that the present situation cannot be maintained indefinitely without the Post Office losing market share, notwithstanding the comments made by the previous Secretary of State in his announcement just before Christmas in 1998. A publicly owned and financed business subject to all the traditional constraints on pay and pricing, on acquisitions and borrowing, and on partnerships and joint ventures has become increasingly anachronistic.

Postal administrations in countries such as Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Switzerland are already benefiting from the greater commercial freedoms that they have achieved. We would do well to remember what some of them have done. Some years ago, the Dutch postal business KPN bought TNT for 2 billion Australian dollars—a huge sum. The German post office acquired more than 20 per cent. of the shares in DHL.

That is the size of the forces massing against us. In both of those countries and in France, the machinery and the rules of the European Union are being used to strengthen those postal organisations before they are fully or even partially privatised. That gives an idea of the market pressures that will be exerted on our own Post Office.

The Bill takes a faltering step down the path to the reality of the commercial world, but surely the Post Office, and in particular Royal Mail, must be set completely free through privatisation, if it is not to be a bit player on the world stage of postal matters. If, before the next general election, the Government want to take that extra step towards privatisation, they can rest assured that we would be only too willing to assist them in that task.

10.37 pm

Mr. Cotter: The atmosphere in Committee was good natured, and I congratulate the Minister, especially on accepting my amendments and introducing measures that we welcomed. *[Interruption.]* The unaccustomed support of my hon. Friends has somewhat put me off.

We are approaching the end of a long process to bring the Post Office into the 21st century. The previous Tory Government lost many valuable years while they hummed and hawed about whether to privatise or whether to do anything at all. In fact, they did nothing.

From 1992 to 1997 the Post Office was in limbo. In July 1992 the Tory Government announced a review of the structure and operations of the Post Office. In 1994 a consultation paper was issued. The confusion carried on, with the Tory President of the Board of Trade saying that he preferred privatisation as an option for the Post Office, but did not have parliamentary support.

In 1996 privatisation was back on the agenda, with a plan to break the Post Office up into 11 regional franchises, similar to the rail privatisation. It was reported that as part of the proposed measures, a 5p cut was possible in the rates for London postal deliveries, which would have had an impact elsewhere in the country.

The previous Government wasted much time in discussion. I recollect that in Committee, the spokesman for the Conservatives complained that we were rushing matters. However, the Government have addressed many of the issues that needed to be addressed. I am glad that they have recognised the need for a publicly owned service. The importance of the Post Office to communities is reflected by the extraordinary number of debates on it that we have had in recent months, as Ministers know. Only last week, there was a strong lobby.

We were pleased but muted in our response today when the Secretary of State introduced new clause 1 because, as the right hon. Gentleman will recognise, his opacity was very much to the fore. We want clarification. We want the new clause to be implemented, and we are pleased that the Government seem to have responded to pressure from the lobbies—

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): And from you.

Mr. Cotter: And from me, as my colleague says. Anyway, the Government seem to have responded to pressure with their proposal for a subsidy, but, as I have said, we await clarification.

Mr. Hancock: Does my hon. Friend agree that a cloud of doubt and uncertainty still hangs over the sub-post office network, and that, despite the promise that they gave earlier this evening, the Government have not done enough to give credibility to their claim that it is safe in their hands?

Mr. Cotter: I agree. So many issues are involved that I could wax on indefinitely—*[Interruption.]* I assure you that I will not, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but let me deal with just one of those issues.

We are concerned about sub-post offices, and about the closure of banks. We have had an assurance from the Government; when I had a meeting with a top manager just the other day, he said that he was in touch with 12 banks with the aim of getting a service operating. That is welcome, but we still have the problem of the lack of clarity. There is still the question of whether the Horizon project will work well with the software that needs to be designed. Will it be able to offer a real banking service?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) pointed out, there are many other issues to be dealt with, but I shall not deal with them at this time of night. [HON. MEMBERS: "Keep going!"] I shall finish while I am ahead.

We are keen to see what will happen, especially to sub-post offices. We shall wait to see how words translate into action, and, in that sense, I look forward to future moves by the Government.

10.42 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The Bill proves that, however often things seem to change, they never change. It is much the same Bill that officials brought to us in April or May 1992, when we had won a general election. We rejected that partial approach on the basis that it was muddled and half-hearted, and would not deliver the first-class postal system that the country needs and deserves.

I suppose the Government will argue that the Bill represents a sensible and non-ideological point of view. In fact, a sensible way of proceeding would be to recognise that Royal Mail is a successful, profit-making international company, at least potentially, and that, as such, it simply must be allowed to compete. It must be allowed to make acquisitions; it must be able to beat off the challenges of the technological age, and, above all, to beat off fierce competition from its German and Dutch rivals. As long as it is under state control, it will never be able to be the highly successful company that it could be.

That is Royal Mail, and that is the future of Royal Mail. That is what Royal Mail will become in the long term. If only Ministers like the Secretary of State, who believe in the vision that I have described, had had the courage of their convictions, we would not now be discussing the privatisation of Royal Mail.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, if we took just that line, many sub-post offices would close?

Mr. Leigh: That is the point of view—the untruth, in a sense—that the Opposition always present. They try to muddle up two issues. [HON. MEMBERS: "The Opposition?"] The opposition to what I have been saying, that is.

Two businesses are involved. There is Royal Mail, which is a competitive, profitable business that can be privatised; and there is Post Office Counters Ltd, an overall national structure which, I agree, cannot be privatised. We made that clear—*[Interruption.]* The national structure—Post Office Counters—is owned by the state. We made it clear when we were hoping to privatise Royal Mail that Post Office Counters would be retained in the public sector to ensure an income stream to the privatised sub-post offices. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. It is extremely unfair to the hon. Gentleman that so many conversations are taking place. The House must come to order.

Mr. Leigh: The Government constantly repeat that the Conservative party wants to privatise the Post Office, yet we intended to privatise only Royal Mail. We never intended to privatise Post Office Counters. Despite our determination to privatise Royal Mail, we would have maintained the universal tariff and universal delivery. [HON. MEMBERS: "How?"] Through the Post Office regulator. The Bill, which we would have brought before Parliament—and we shall introduce it one day—*[Interruption.]* What will happen is inevitable. The Government will find that they simply cannot allow the Post Office to be a strange creature, half public, half private, owned by the state yet allowed to compete in the private sector. That is unfair and uncompetitive, and it will not happen.

Labour Back Benchers must know that the Government's secret agenda is full privatisation. That is the logical conclusion of their proposals. Why not be honest about it and privatise Royal Mail, but with the protections that I described to ensure a universal tariff and universal delivery? That could be achieved.

Post Office Counters is a different operation. Sub-post offices are already in private hands. They are run by business men and women, who want not subsidies, but an income stream. Post Office Counters must be kept in the public sector and the income stream must be guaranteed. The Bill will not achieve that. The measure gives the Government only the power to provide subsidies.

The Government's approach to the Post Office Counters network is wrong. Instead of forcing pensioners to accept their pensions through a bank account, we should mechanise sub-post offices and ensure that every sub-post office has the ability to develop modern post office and banking services. Pensioners could thus take their pensions from sub-post offices. The Government claim that they are providing for that. Their constant refrain is that a pension costs only 1p to deliver through the bank, but 48p through the Post Office. However, they do not admit that although it costs 1p to transfer the money from the bank to local distribution centres, it costs much more to pass the money over the counter.

Today we read that Lloyds bank will charge its customers 50p to use the cash machines. The Government must come clean; there is no way out. Once one forces pensioners to accept their pensions through a bank account, they will be subject to hidden charges. Nobody has explained how those costs will be paid. Banks are not charitable organisations; they will insist on their costs being met. The public purse or pensioners will ultimately have to pay. That is why the Government's approach is wrong.

The Government could have introduced a Bill that ensured that Royal Mail was competitive, profitable and independent. They could have retained Post Office Counters in the public sector and guaranteed an income stream for sub-post offices. They could have helped sub-post offices to mechanise and prepare for the future. That would have been an exciting, worthwhile and right measure. The Bill simply represents the Secretary of State putting a toe in the water. It is a pity that he cannot have the courage of his convictions and introduce a Bill that we all support.

10.49 pm

Mr. Baldry: I promise not to detain the House long, but, having sat through proceedings on a number of Select Committee reports on the Post Office and most of the debates in Committee, I want to make a few comments.

On Third Reading, the Bill is a muddled halfway house and the Government have failed to give the Post Office the freedom that it needs to compete against its international rivals. Without full commercial freedom, it cannot take advantage of being the most efficient postal service in the world. Curiously, new clause 1, which proposed some subsidies, was introduced on Report. All Conservative Members, along with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, wish that not an opaque

subsidy, but a real income stream, had been introduced to support the post office network. The proposal was needed only because the Government are proceeding with the disastrous policy of switching to automated credit transfer, which threatens the survival of thousands of sub-post offices across Britain.

In months to come, Conservative Members will look for transparency in the accounting structures to ensure that there is no undue or hidden cross-subsidy from monopoly to non-monopoly areas in the Post Office. We have welcomed the decision to grant plc status, but there is no support for the 100 per cent. retention of public ownership. The Government should have sold at least 51 per cent. of the shares, which would have enabled the Post Office to compete on a level playing field, particularly with Dutch and German post offices. We all know why the Government held back and this evening we heard examples of how they are beholden to the trade unions. The Minister said that Post Office Bills come around only once every decade and it will be interesting to see how long this one endures. Back-tracking on plans to reduce the Post Office's legal monopoly over deliveries from £1 to 50p, which followed strong trade union opposition, is another example of how the Government are in thrall to the unions.

Without full commercial freedom, the Post Office cannot take advantage of being the most efficient postal service in the world, so there is real doubt as to whether the Bill will succeed in its aim of providing greater commercial freedoms. It offers little comfort to those threatened with the loss of their livelihood following the Treasury-led decision to switch benefit payments to ACT and the future of a third of the 18,5000 sub-post offices is at risk.

Although the Bill puts in place the mechanism for setting out access criteria for the post office network, details will not be forthcoming until after the performance and innovation unit has reported. Again, that is a bizarre way to implement legislation. However, nothing surprises me about a Government who managed to introduce what they admit to be the most important measure in the Bill not on Second Reading or in Committee, but on Report. That is perhaps their hallmark; it is certainly the hallmark of the Department of Trade and Industry. They create huge problems and spend a considerable time struggling to solve them. That is apparent in automotive industry policy, energy policy—yesterday's statement to the House made it clear—and postal services policy.

We all hope that the Post Office will be able to compete against international competition, but I fear that this muddled, halfway house of a Bill is a disservice to the Post Office and to United Kingdom consumers.

10.53 pm

Mr. Burns: As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) said, the Bill is a muddled halfway house. It represents a group of issues that have been lumped together in a Post Office Bill because they relate to post offices. However, for people outside the House who are not aficionados of the minutiae of the problems facing the Post Office in respect of its ability to compete, the outstanding concern is the future of the post office and sub-post office network throughout this country.

As the Secretary of State candidly admitted in a somewhat cavalier fashion, his thinking and decision making were affected not by the relevance of last Wednesday's debates in Westminster Hall and in the Chamber, but—his words show how the Government treat the House with utter contempt—the 3 million signatures on the petition from sub-post offices. That is what most influenced his decision to try to allay public fears.

The thing that worries me about the Bill is that all of us, regardless of which side of the House we are on, have in the past six months or so seen the concerns and anger of pensioners and others in receipt of benefits who use either their rural sub-post office or their suburban post office to collect those benefits. We have seen the concerns and anger of postmasters and postmistresses, whose livelihoods have depended on the structure and business as currently constituted. That anger has been caused by the Treasury's decision, aided and abetted by the Secretary of State for Social Security, to change the way in which benefits will be paid.

Figures have been bandied about over a number of weeks and months, both on the Floor of the House and in Committee—there has been the threat of possibly a third of sub-post offices being closed. That is what has generated tremendous fear among those who use sub-post offices and those who operate them, for whom it is their livelihood.

It has brought fear to a number of Labour Members, who have witnessed the pressures felt by their constituents who have been so concerned about the implications of the Treasury-driven policies. One only has to read regional newspapers to realise that Labour Members are queueing up to have their photographs appear in them, claiming their support for sub-post offices and for the rights of their constituents to continue to collect their benefits as they always have. However, it is interesting that few Labour Members have today echoed the concerns that they expressed in local newspapers.

The Deputy Chief Whip, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley), has been sitting in his place listening to the debate. No doubt the serried ranks behind him have been aware of it. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) described the Secretary of State as the Corporal Jones of the scenario. The Deputy Chief Whip's colleagues behind him know that Herr Flick is keeping an eye on the cohorts of the Labour Benches to ensure that no one gets up and causes any problems for the Government.

The problem is new clause 1, which the Secretary of State introduced today. I do not believe that its inclusion in the Bill, to which presumably we will give a Third Reading in the not too distant future, enhances the Bill. I do not believe that it addresses the problems that the Secretary of State has sought to convince the House it does.

The new clause seeks to introduce a subsidy system. The trouble is that it is so vague. There are so many ifs, buts, mays and shalls in it that there are many escape routes that allow the Government not to bring in a scheme if they decide at a later date either that they can get away with not doing so, or, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said, that they do not want to open up a bottomless pit of public subsidies ad infinitum.

As was said earlier, subsection (6) of the new clause even has a provision to ensure that the power to make a scheme under the new clause shall not be exercised without the consent of the Treasury.

[Mr. Burns]

As I reminded the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in an intervention—which he did not deal with specifically—he has been a Chief Secretary to the Treasury; and, as any Chief Secretary will know, the Treasury's workings are supreme within Government. The Treasury's consent for any scheme involving the expenditure of public money is the paramount factor.

It will be interesting to see whether the Secretary of State is sufficiently candid to tell the House before the Bill is passed whether the Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry have calculated the subsidy's cost; whether the Treasury has told him that it has placed a ceiling on the amount of public money it is prepared to spend, thereby possibly restricting the scheme's effectiveness; and whether the scheme is time limited or open ended.

If we are to deal with the concerns of the general public and of those who run sub-post offices, we need answers to those questions. Sub-postmasters need to know whether they will be helped, or whether the scheme is simply spin. They need to know whether—once the Bill is passed by both Houses and Parliament can no longer try to amend it, and if the Government will not implement the scheme that the Secretary of State has unveiled today—they will be left to hang out to dry.

As half a fish is better than none, I do not oppose new clause 1. However, it is seriously flawed by its vagueness and by the sparsity of detail on it provided to the House. I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will address those issues. *[Interruption.]* The Deputy Chief Whip disappoints me by shaking his head. He seems to be suggesting that no Minister will bother to reply to the debate. That is unfortunate because this is an important Third Reading debate on an important Bill. We should have had that information before Third Reading.

11.2 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): As has been said often in the debate, the Bill is somewhat disappointing. I give the Government half marks for recognising that the Post Office needs greater commercial freedom, and also for recognising that their own decision making has threatened the future of the rural post office network and that they need to be responsible for providing financial support.

I cannot, however, give them credit for the half-hearted way in which they have introduced a half-thought-through privatisation scheme; the way in which they have not properly considered the implications of the commercial freedoms that they are introducing in the Post Office; and—as my hon. Friend the Member for South–West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) said—the way in which they have clearly inadequately considered the example of similar events elsewhere in Europe and in the rest of the world.

As for the hon. Member for Weston–super–Mare (Mr. Cotter), who spoke on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I give him credit for making a speech that, in many ways, was a typical Liberal Democrat speech. He was half on the Government's side and half against the Government. He therefore spent most of his speech attacking the official Opposition. He certainly gave no justification—no justification can be given—for Liberal Democrat Members' decision last week to vote with the Government against the official Opposition on a motion to save the rural post office network by scrapping the Government's plans.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Collins: I have no intention of giving way to the hon. Gentleman; we have heard quite enough from the Liberal Democrats on these matters.

It is deeply disappointing to hear from the Government that they believe that new clause 1 will provide the solution to the difficulty that they themselves have created. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) that the Secretary of State is increasingly resorting to short-term temporary subsidies to get himself out of short-term political difficulties. This week, the consensus in the national newspapers has been that the Secretary of State's announcement on a subsidy scheme for the coal industry was designed simply to keep minds open until after polling day in the general election.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are debating the Bill's Third Reading, not what is happening in the coal industry.

Mr. Collins: The suspicion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that the subsidy in this Bill has precisely the same short-term purpose—merely to keep post offices open until after polling day, after which the Secretary of State will not be interested.

If rural post offices are dependent on Treasury funding, they will be mindful of the fact that Treasury funding under this Government has not been sufficient to keep our police stations open or our roads and village schools maintained. The same Treasury, with the same Ministers providing the same funding formula, will supposedly keep open our local post offices. The result, once again, will be a betrayal by the Government.

In last week's debate, I asked the Secretary of State whether he could guarantee to match the one third of income to be lost by Mrs. Hilary Pavitt, the postmistress at Kent's Bank post office at Grange-over-Sands. He refused to give that guarantee then. Nothing that he has said today leaves me with any greater indication that she will get the resources that she needs. The Bill is a short-term political fix from a Secretary of State who is in a lot of short-term political fixes at the moment.

11.6 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): It is shocking that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) criticised the Liberal Democrats for not supporting a Conservative motion which asked this House to applaud the record of the last Conservative Government. Under that Government, approximately 3,000 post offices in the network closed. There was no way this party would support such a motion, because it was hypocritical and did a lot of damage to the current campaign to persuade the Government to change their mind and defend the post office network. The Conservatives do pensioners no favours with their hypocrisies, and we will not support such statements.

Before coming to this House, I was a management consultant for a company called Omega Partners, which did a lot of work in the postal service industry. I visited 40 postal administrations and worked for 12 of them. I wrote a paper, co-authored with a company called Pricewaterhouse, for the US Congress on how one could commercialise, deregulate and liberalise postal markets.

That study looked at the experience of post offices internationally and how they could commercialise and gain commercial freedoms, as the Bill seeks to provide for the British Post Office. It was clear that post offices had managed to enter the modern world, take on modern management theory and develop and modernise their postal services while remaining in the public sector. To that extent, I welcome the Bill, which retains the UK Post Office in the public sector.

However, the commercial freedoms that are being given to the Post Office in the Bill are limited. Countries such as New Zealand, Finland and Sweden have enabled the management of their post offices to invest, develop modern technology, have freedoms to manage their work forces more effectively and provide the consumer with a better-quality service at a lower price. They have been able to do that far more ambitiously than this rather timid Bill proposes.

When the New Zealand post office was given its commercial freedom, it was allowed four long-term lines of credit with private sector banks. These were not guaranteed by the state; therefore, they did not score in what used to be called the public sector borrowing requirement.

Mr. Alan Johnson: I just wondered whether the hon. Gentleman had noticed in the course of his investigations that New Zealand Post no longer delivers to the door in rural areas; and that, despite paying a charge of $80 a year, rural customers still have to collect their mail from the nearest post office.

Mr. Davey: I am well aware of that, but the Minister does not give the full story. He may not know that I have visited New Zealand Post twice and I have spoken to the former chief executive, a Mr. Elmar Toime, who is actually a citizen of Australia. He explained that situation when I questioned him on that very point. He said that those circumstances affected a small handful of farms on the south island of New Zealand that were hundreds of miles from the postal network. In other words, New Zealand Post faces totally different geographical and topographical conditions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is very interesting hearing about New Zealand. I have relatives there and it is nice to hear how they are getting on. However, on Third Reading we should perhaps not be going into such detail. It is necessary to mention only that there are good things and bad things about New Zealand and then move on.

Mr. Davey: I totally agree with you, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I am in danger of being a post office anorak. However, my point was about capital investment, which goes to the heart of the Bill. The experience of other countries, such as New Zealand, shows that long-term lines of credit that have not been guaranteed by the state have enabled other postal administrations to develop real commercial freedoms to invest significantly and develop their services.

Those postal services have blossomed, and the only reason we have not taken that route in this country has nothing to do with a tiny number of very remote farms having to collect their post at the end of long lanes, but is connected with Treasury rules that are constraining the development of a potential new type of corporation. New Labour's modernisation programme has not seen fit to modernise the Treasury. The prehistoric, dinosaur thinking of the Treasury has not changed one bit to enable the sort of development that has taken place in other western democracies and allowed them to modernise their public services. That is why the Bill has not lived up to the billing that the Government gave it, and that is a great shame. If the Government had given the Post Office those unguaranteed long-term lines of credit, with no bail-out from the state, it would have enabled the development of a real entrepreneurship within public sector ownership. It is a shame that the Government have not taken that approach.

Subsidies have been an issue in the debate tonight. In many ways, total nonsense has been talked about subsidy, because there have always been subsidies in the Post Office. The whole system of uniform pricing and uniform tariffs incorporates subsidy, and the idea that there was no subsidy under the Conservatives is nonsense. There were vast subsidies paid between one post office network system and another, between delivery in one city and delivery in another, and between delivery in urban areas and delivery in rural areas. Of course those subsidies existed. The Bill means that they will continue, but in a different form.

The question is not whether subsidies are paid to maintain a universal postal service in the country—I am sure that all hon. Members would agree that such subsidies are needed; the question is one of transparency. Under the Conservative Government, the subsidies were totally opaque. New clause 1 has brought a degree of increased transparency, although I wish that it made matters clearer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) said, the question of subsidies is still far too opaque, but at least it is clearer than it was under the ancien regime of the former Conservative Government.

It is amazing that Conservative Members should criticise subsidies now. Subsidies existed under the previous Conservative Government, who were not prepared to acknowledge them. They wanted to try to hide them and pretend that they did not exist.

Mr. Leigh: Does not their acceptance of the universal service and universal tariff shout from the rooftops the fact that the previous Conservative Government, like every other Government, accepted the principle of cross-subsidy in the Post Office?

Mr. Davey: That was exactly my point, but the question is whether a Government are willing to make those subsidies more transparent. This Government are going down that road, and the previous Government did not. I think greater transparency in subsidies would assist public policy development.

Finally, I am worried that the Bill does not protect sufficiently the ordinary post offices in my constituency. Under the Conservative Government, post offices in Kingston, Tolworth and Surbiton were closed. The Bill will cause some of the retail outlets that took over some of those post offices' responsibilities to close as well.

[Mr. Davey]

That would be a great shame. People will be put out of business. Pensioners will have to take long bus journeys into town to collect their pensions. That will reduce the services available to my constituents, and I sincerely regret that the Government are going down this route.

The Government should be modernising by trying to assist the Post Office to take on contracts from the banks. The Bill does not do that, and it fails to give real commercial freedom to the Post Office. It is therefore a missed opportunity.

11.18 pm

Mr. McLoughlin: Having listened to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), I am glad that the Liberal Democrats are the Government's allies, and not the Opposition's. The hon. Gentleman said that he has studied the matter with great care and has examined what has gone on in New Zealand, but the Minister was able to point out some of the disparities between the universal service here and the service in New Zealand.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton answered that we should not worry about a few farmers scattered around the ends of the earth. That is an insult to farmers in my constituency of West Derbyshire—and to farmers in the Romsey constituency. I shall take every opportunity to make sure that they are aware of what the hon. Gentleman said.

I shall not make a long speech, unlike the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton, who took us on a world tour.

Mr. Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman does not have a clue.

Mr. McLoughlin: The hon. Gentleman says that I do not have a clue, but if he spoke with a clue, I am glad that I speak without one.

I am sorry that the Secretary of State waited so long before bringing new clause 1 before the House. In so doing, he did not give us enough opportunity to study the new clause. Having seen it, I can understand why he did not want to give us long to study it. The new clause does not say that there will be a subsidy to village post offices, or what level of subsidy it will be. Let us be clear that we are talking about sub-post offices.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton talked about 3,000 post offices having closed during 18 years of Conservative Government. Post offices will close, given the very nature of their business. They are often run from people's homes, and when the people running them want to retire and sell their homes, that leads to closures. I accept that there were closures under the previous Government, yet over the past three years we have seen 1,000 closures. That is an escalation of post office closures on a massive scale, which is why the Government introduced their new clause. When the Bill was first conceived, the Government were not looking at supporting the sub-post office network. It is only as the Bill has progressed through the House that the new clause has been brought forward.

I have seen the number of post office closures in my constituency escalate dramatically. There have been closures in Cubley, Longford, Roston, Flagg, Lea Bridge, Tissington, Fenny Bentley and Taddington. Such a major escalation of closures is a cause of concern. It is partly due to the Government's insistence on the switch to automated credit transfer and the fear that that decision has struck into the sub-post office network. That is why, after much pressure on the Government, we have managed to drag out from them this new clause.

I hope that the new clause will do what the Government desire. We will be watching future closures very closely. The system of subsidy does not reflect the great difference in the rural network of sub-post offices. Some are open for two hours in the morning for four or five days a week, while others are full time. It will be interesting to see how the Government arrive at the formula to give subsidies to community post offices and to those that offer full services in rural areas.

We have not found out enough from the Government. I hope that when the Bill goes to another place, people there will tease out from the Government exactly what they are talking about in new clause 1. I hope that the other place will fulfil that role.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Criminal Law

That the draft Youth Justice Board for England and Wales Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 3rd April, be approved.

Local Government Finance

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 61) on Special Grants for School Standards, Support of School Budgets and Costs of Transitional Funding (HC 399), which was laid before this House on 6th April, be approved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

Assisted Areas Map

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

11.24 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North–East Cambridgeshire): The Minister's announcement on 10 April of the Government's intention to submit an amended set of proposals for new assisted areas brought disappointment and dismay to many of my constituents and delivered a body blow to the Fenland area. It is almost a year since I stood in more or less the same place in the Chamber to plead the case for the continuation of assisted area status for Wisbech. At that time, the Government were making their first attempt to redraw the regional selective assistance map of the United Kingdom. We were delighted that a new area, embracing Fenland district council and King's Lynn and West Norfolk borough council, was designated by the Government and included in their submission to the European Commission in July 1999.

Imagine our devastation, then, when we heard of the Government's latest U-turn. Our area is to be removed from the assisted area map because of concerns expressed by the Commission, and we have only three weeks for consultation. I believe that the Government have made an error of judgment, and I shall try to put the case for reinstatement of the Fenland partnership area in the assisted area map.

No one disputes that there must be rules and strict criteria to identify areas that warrant regional selective assistance. However, a model that fits the city-region concept of mainland Europe does not necessarily embrace the particular needs of rural areas in the UK. To my mind, the key is flexibility, without which needy areas such as Fenland and others in the eastern region will lose out.

The new criteria set by the Commission require a reduced population coverage of the national map. The eastern region has provided 43 per cent. of the reduction. That can hardly be fair when eight regions are involved. The east of England is being asked to shoulder the lion's share of the proposed reduction, but has also received the lowest funding for its regional development agency and its inward investment effort.

Several companies with the potential to employ significant numbers in a rural area suffering from a steady reduction in agricultural employment have been encouraged to consider investment in the fens. They have been attracted by the opportunity of offsetting logistical disadvantages with financial assistance. I believe that Fenland and King's Lynn and West Norfolk deserve reinstatement.

Let us consider the track record of assisted area status in the Wisbech travel-to-work area, which has been the cornerstone of economic regeneration in the area since 1993. The area has an impressive track record in attracting grant, assisting companies and creating and safeguarding jobs. Some 75 offers of grant were made, totalling £5.6 million. That levered in some £35 million in private investment. A total of 1,043 jobs were safeguarded, and 1,296 created. There is both an opportunity and a need to continue to make effective use of regional selective assistance grants and to secure best value from them in the King's Lynn and Fenland areas.

In the recently published draft regional planning guidance, paragraph 4.2.5 states that a key element of the strategy is

> addressing the remaining disparities in opportunities and quality of life across the region through a focus on the priority areas for regeneration.

Policy 10 of the guidance states:

> Development plans should include policies consistent with sustainable development to promote regeneration, economic enhancement and environment protection and enhancement of the Priority Areas for Regeneration, including Wisbech and the remote rural areas, the Rural Development Areas and those rural areas designated under the European Union's Objective 2 and Transitional Objective 5b programmes.

Among other things, policies in those priority areas should, first, ensure an adequate supply of land, employment and premises; secondly, promote the areas for inward investment; and, thirdly, provide business support services.

The priority areas for the regeneration strategy are also reflected in the regional economic development strategy published by the East of England development agency. One of the aims of that strategy is the development of a thriving rural economy. Strategic priorities identified in the REDS include the attraction of new and high-growth businesses to the area; the revival of market towns; and the support of diversification in the agricultural sector. The strategy also refers specifically to the rural development area and to the Wisbech priority area for economic regeneration.

If the Government are serious about developing a thriving rural economy and targeting resources on priority areas for regeneration, they must understand the important role that assisted area designation has played, and can play in future, in delivering their stated economic objectives in the fens. To withdraw assisted area status does not represent joined-up thinking on the implementation of their policies for those areas that have already been identified as priorities for regeneration.

Although current economic headline indicators might not appear to be as poor as those for other areas, the Fenland and the King's Lynn and West Norfolk areas are characterised by an exposure to structural decline among traditional local industries; by over-dependence on declining economic sectors—Fenland is placed at 443 out of 459 in the Henley centre's industrial structure index; by a forecast jobs gap of 9,800 by 2006; by low educational attainment and skills; by lack of an investment image and a credible offer in the investment market; by a cost-value gap for industrial and commercial development that inhibits investment; and, finally, by peripherality and poor strategic transport infrastructure.

The substantive case relates to the underpinning principles of the Industrial Development Act 1982, which clearly states that the Secretary of State

> shall have regard to all the circumstances, actual and expected, including the state of employment and unemployment, population changes, migration and the objectives of regional policies.

The economy of the area has shown some improvement in recent years, in line with the national picture. However, the local economy and employment are based on industries that are in rapid decline, where only continuing capital investment will prevent rundown and closure. Recent closures and job losses in the fens include H.L. Foods Ltd., which is making 300 people redundant. Kings Lynn Steel is closing, creating 40 redundancies;

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

SCL Breamist Ltd. is closing, making 70 people redundant; and Courtaulds is closing with 75 redundancies.

Without the designation, private sector investments will be diverted elsewhere in the United Kingdom and to Europe. Nor have the fens benefited from a jobs and business spin-out from Cambridge with its high-tech and knowledge-based economy—despite its geographical proximity. That benefit may reach the southern parts of the fens in the longer term, but it is unlikely to affect the whole area until there are significant improvements in the skills of the work force and in the transport infrastructure. It is simply unrealistic to expect benefits from Cambridge.

The area's poor future prospects are demonstrated by the fact that it has little representation in the seven sectors identified by the East of England development agency as key to the region's future growth and prosperity. The fens has a far lower proportion of employment in those sectors than the region or England as a whole. It also has a work force with considerably lower educational attainment and skill levels than elsewhere in the region. Such attainment and skills are essential to attract and support these high-growth sectors.

The withdrawal of assisted area status puts at risk the attraction of the areas to future investors. Specifically at risk is a significant investment by a European company in the fens.

I have in front of me a letter from the managing director of Graveley Packing, owned by Budelpack, a Dutch company. The managing director, James Robinson, writes to me in the following vein:

> I was dismayed to hear the news that the Government has decided to remove Fenland from the above grant assistance.
>
> As you may know we applied for, and received, a grant of £0.5m towards buildings and equipment under the selective regional assistance scheme. This of course was subject to the EC confirming the UK regional proposals. The grant was based upon the creation of 283 permanent and 75 temporary jobs in addition to safeguarding the current 125 jobs.
>
> Because industrial property values in March
>
> in the constituency of North-East Cambridgeshire
>
> are extremely low we have to take a substantial loss on our investment. Our new building will cost £3.8 million. Its open market value when complete will be
>
> only
>
> £2.8m. We have had huge difficulty in obtaining adequate external finance for the building because of this £1m cost-value gap. I have today received a suitable offer but unfortunately it is dependent on grant assistance being
>
> made
>
> available to us.
>
> It appears therefore that this decision, if confirmed, has pulled the rug out from under our scheme and its associated job creation.

The possible consolation prize of tier 3 assistance of some 7.5 per cent. grant aid to a maximum of £75,000 in Cambridgeshire is not an option. That company is unlikely to be eligible, as it is too large and multinational—and, of course, the Dutch parent company takes a dim view of what has taken place.

While the first programme of assisted area benefits had largely helped the indigenous business base, there were emerging benefits of attracting new firms to the area from abroad. Those benefits will now be lost, as the fens will no longer be able to offer financial support for companies seeking to relocate to the area.

The way forward for the fens is to redraw the whole map and provide the fens with the assistance that it needs. I know that we have only a few weeks for consultation and I recognise the need for the Government to press on with the regional map so that the key areas may receive the necessary financial assistance. Therefore, in asking the Minister to consider redrawing the map, I realise that it is something of a tall order.

However, last week, the Government, in launching their national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, acknowledged that job creation was the key to addressing social exclusion. Regional selective assistance and the invaluable help that it provides in both creating and retaining jobs is crucial to addressing the wider deprivation and social exclusion problems facing the fens. It will support investment to retain and enhance the competitiveness and performance of existing industry—notably the food cluster that we have in that part of the fens. It will be a vital tool in creating opportunities for rewarding work, raising aspirations and making learning pay. Finally, it will promote private sector investment in infrastructure and property, essential prerequisites for attracting and creating more businesses.

All the agencies in the fens area are committed to working together in a co-ordinated way to address the area's problems. The area had already suffered one body blow, with its failure last autumn to be designated as an objective 2 area. Without RSA designation, it is likely to miss out on other forms of national support, such as the single regeneration budget and EEDA's partnership investment programme, which is largely tied to such priority areas. The funding available to EEDA, as the most poorly resourced RDA in England, is already limited. Targeting to objective 2 and RSA areas will mean that little funding is available for other areas that are not so designated.

Assisted area designation up to 1999 brought significant benefits to Wisbech. It helped the area benefit from the general improvement in the national economy. However, agencies in the fens believe that this is only a temporary position, and that with the removal of two core pillars of support—objective 2 and the RSA—the economy will falter and slip into decline. Assisted area designation will help prevent that, and, as we all know, prevention is better and less costly than cure.

The Minister will now know that the fens should not be bypassed again, and he should give the partners—notably the East of England development agency—the resources to do their job. I ask the Minister to assist and encourage all central Government, regional and local agencies and the private sector to work together to address the problems of the fens area. We hope that, in this very short consultation period, they will listen to all the representations made to them by the interested parties, and reinstate the fens on the assisted area map.

11.42 pm

Dr. George Turner (North–West Norfolk): I congratulate the hon. Member for North–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) on securing this short debate, and thank him for allowing me to contribute briefly to it.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the area that earlier had assisted area status included the fenlands part of my constituency to the west of King's Lynn, which forms

almost a separate travel-to-work area from the Wisbech area. The hon. Gentleman made the case very clearly with regard to the disappointment that will be felt by my constituents who live in that fenlands part of my constituency, who will feel the same deprivation as his constituency will feel over the withdrawal of support for that travel-to-work area.

I must admit that there was some icing on the cake for us last summer, when we heard that the Government were taking to Europe proposals to extend the former area to include much of the rest of my constituency—in particular, some of the major areas of deprivation in the King's Lynn area itself. It is a part of the country that has lost many jobs as a result of the decline of fishing from the port and the loss of the food processing and canning works which were there historically, and one that suffers from a great portion of work being too low-paid and in non-growth areas of the economy. We were looking forward to the extra support that assisted area status would have brought to us.

Those constituents saw what they had thought would be some icing and some jam taken away from them. I suppose that they will reflect that, under the same Government in the past three years, unemployment has dropped considerably within the area. The economic development officer will have a harder case to make in pressing the need for assisted area status than he would have had three or four years ago, thanks to the Government's success in running the economy.

I should like to add two points to those made by the hon. Gentleman. First, could my right hon. Friend the Minister assure us that the case that is being drawn up will be considered carefully? The representations and the work being done now will be considered in a short consultation period, so will he assure my constituents that that does not mean, as some cynically think, that the representations will not be listened to? Secondly, will he assure us that the decision, which was pushed on us in large part from Europe, does not mean that the Government will withdraw other measures of support and that they will consider carefully the needs of the area? As the hon. Gentleman said, we have one of the worst funded—by almost a factor of two—regional development agencies in the country. There is concern that not enough measures are in place to support the economy if assisted area status is not given to us.

11.45 pm

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): I commend the hon. Member for North–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) on the case that he has put forward on behalf of his constituents for assisted area status. I understand his disappointment and that of my hon. Friend the Member for North–West Norfolk (Dr. Turner). May I point out at the outset that—yes—the consultation period is short, but we will consider all representations very seriously?

The east of England region, even under the amended proposals, will have an increase in coverage on the assisted areas map, which was introduced in 1993. That increase has been made at a time when the overall population coverage has been reduced by a fifth. Overall, the amended proposals will represent a pretty good deal for the east of England region.

There is, I know, disappointment in King's Lynn and the fenland areas. However, there is a recognition and understanding of why the changes have been made. Indeed, I was particularly interested to read last Tuesday's article on the assisted areas announcement in the *Eastern Daily Press*. In that article, the chairman of the development committee of King's Lynn and West Norfolk council is quoted as saying that, in comparison with other areas—including Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Luton—that area has not done too badly. Similarly officials at Fenland council are quoted as saying:

> The first time we applied for assisted area status in 1994, unemployment was three times above the national average and now it is only half of one per cent. above it. There are areas of much greater need than ours.

The local newspaper and the people who were quoted were responsible to make that point.

The *Eastern Daily Press* article clearly shows that, although there is disappointment, there is also an understanding of why we have made the choices that we have. Our objective for the new assisted areas is to target assistance on areas of need where such assistance will be effective in meeting that need. That remains the case.

However, we are trying to meet our objective within the population ceiling that the European Commission has set us. If we include King's Lynn and Fenland in our proposals, another area—either in the region or across the country—will have to come out to facilitate that. That is the hard choice that we have had to make.

We recognised the needs of King's Lynn and Fenland in our original proposals and I can assure the hon. Member for North–East Cambridgeshire that we fought hard to secure the July proposals that we submitted to the European Commission. However, ultimately the Commission holds the whip hand on assisted areas. Therefore, we were faced with the choice of amending our proposals or facing, as the hon. Gentleman underlined, a lengthy and uncertain investigation process, at the end of which we might still have been in exactly the same position as we are now.

The hon. Gentleman may find it helpful if I set out the background to the changes that we made last week. The Commission made it clear to us that it was concerned that our July proposals would have given the United Kingdom an unfair advantage over other member states. However, in view of the misconception that appears to be held by some people, I want to stress that the Commission did not decide that our July proposals were illegal. Also, I note that it has never accused us of gerrymandering them.

The competition directorate of the Commission was concerned that our approach to the July proposals might have allowed the UK to include employment sites within the assisted areas without including the population in surrounding areas who might benefit from aid given to the businesses on those sites. Within our population ceiling, that would have allowed the UK greater scope for securing mobile investment in competition with our European partners.

In view of those doubts, Commissioner Monti informed us that unless the proposals were amended, he would be required to open an investigative procedure under article 88(2). Under that procedure, the Commission would set out its concerns about the UK's proposals and invite comments from interested parties, not just in the UK but in every member state. It would then, in the light of those comments, decide whether to accept the proposals.

Even if our proposals were accepted at the end of that procedure, approval of the new assisted areas would be delayed by up to six months. The hon. Gentleman

[Mr. Richard Caborn]

recognised that there would have been a risk that our original proposals would not be accepted at the end of the article 88(2) procedure, given the Commission's concern that our proposals gave us an unfair advantage and given the scope for interested parties in other member states to put their case. The only alternative open to us, other than the article 88(2) procedure, was to amend our proposals to meet the Commission's concerns, and that is what we duly did.

We are not alone in amending our proposals in response to the concerns raised by the Commission. The European Commission opened article 88(2) proceedings against the proposals submitted by Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal and Italy. Germany, Belgium, France and the Netherlands have amended, or are amending, their proposals in response to the Commission's request. The procedure continues for the other member states.

With many other member states making changes and securing the Commission's agreement to their new regional aid maps, it would have been wrong to continue to press our case with no guarantee of success. The new assisted areas map will benefit some 16.5 million people in the UK. During the seven years that the map is in place, companies will be able to apply for grant aid from total expenditure currently in excess of £250 million a year. Further delay and uncertainty would have been damaging to those people and businesses.

We have had to make a number of hard decisions and as a consequence some areas have had to be removed from the map. Although that is obviously disappointing for the areas concerned, I am confident that our new proposals present the best possible deal that we could broker with the Commission.

I should, however, make it clear that the new assisted areas are only part of the Government's strategy for tackling regional and local needs. We are putting in place a comprehensive framework for ensuring that all parts of Britain can meet the challenges of the future. We inherited an unco-ordinated, disjointed set of regional bodies. Regional activity on inward investment, supply chains, rural development, physical regeneration and social and economic regeneration were all in separate organisations. There was no overall strategy to bring together regional activity. We have addressed those problems.

I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman pleaded for more resources for the East of England development agency, and I hope that he will continue to do so. I hope that, if the Conservatives ever get back into power—God forbid—he will argue that the development agencies ought to remain in place, because the official position of Conservative Front-Bench Members is that they will be closed down. It is therefore pleasing that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges the worth of the development agency in the lives of his constituents.

The hon. Gentleman will also understand that we have devolved power to Scotland and Wales and set up the regional development agencies in England to address the fragmentation to which I referred. Last October, each RDA produced, with local partners, a strategy for improving the economic performance—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at six minutes to Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 19 April 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Wednesday 3 May.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Care Standards Bill

1. **Mr. Win Griffiths** (Bridgend): What representations he has received about the Care Standards Bill *[Lords]* in the last month. [118432]

5. **Ms Julie Morgan** (Cardiff, North): What representations he has received about the Care Standards Bill *[Lords]*. [118437]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): In the context of the Care Standards Bill, I have received a number of representations relating to proposals for a children's commissioner for Wales. I am pleased to be able to confirm to the House today that the remit of the children's commissioner for Wales will extend to children coming within all the services to be regulated under the terms of the Care Standards Bill.

Mr. Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Will he list exactly those services that will be covered by the children's commissioner, and reassure us that the amendment will be drafted so as to give the National Assembly for Wales some powers to extend the role of the commissioner beyond that envisaged in the Bill?

Mr. Murphy: As well as all children's homes, the commissioner will deal with services in private and voluntary hospitals, the welfare of children living away from home in boarding schools, fostering agencies, voluntary adoption agencies, local authority fostering and adoption services, welfare aspects of day care and child minding provision for the under-eights, residential family centres and children who receive special care in their own homes. I am delighted to be able to tell the House that my officials and Assembly officials are working together to prepare the amendment to the Care Standards Bill. We are in close contact with the Assembly about any future remit.

Ms Morgan: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply. Will he reassure me that he will work closely with the Health and Social Services Secretary, Jane Hutt, and the Secretary for Education and Children, Rosemary Butler, to ensure that the final legislative powers of the children's commissioner apply to all children in Wales and have as their foundation the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, so that the powers extend beyond the powers provided in the Care Standards Bill?

Mr. Murphy: Yes. The Assembly is still considering a wider role and remit. The Government will urgently and sympathetically consider proposals when they are ready, but I believe that the office of children's commissioner for Wales, set up as it will be under the Care Standards Bill and together with the additions and the work that the Assembly is doing, will mean that we are leading the United Kingdom and Europe in terms of such a role.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I welcome the answer from the Secretary of State, as far as it goes. Can he clarify what will be the position of children who live in their own homes and are on the at-risk register, but who may not be getting special provision? Will the legislation be broad enough to give the commissioner powers to deal with those children? If the Bill is not wide enough, what mechanism could be used to fast-track those additional powers, on which all parties agree?

Mr. Murphy: I understand the point that the right hon. Gentleman has made, and I know that he is interested in these matters. The Care Standards Bill will not cover the category of children that he mentioned, but the matter is under consideration by the Assembly, working together with my Department and others in London. We will try as fast as we can to ensure that we cover all the aspects of the role of the children's commissioner. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it is important for us to look carefully at the protocol that governs arrangements between the Assembly and the House of Commons as far as legislation is concerned, and I hope to return to those issues after the recess.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the regulations that flow from the Bill be subject to the negative or the affirmative procedure?

Mr. Murphy: That matter will be dealt with in Committee when the Care Standards Bill goes through its stages here.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): In the light of the north Wales child abuse inquiry report and other matters, I welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that he will use the widest possible powers in the Care Standards Bill to develop the role of the commissioner. In the longer term, will he look to use other legislative opportunities, so that that role can develop to cover all matters that affect children and to ensure that the role is as comprehensive as possible?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, I can give that assurance to my right hon. Friend, and it is good to see him in the

Chamber. As I have said to other hon. Members today, these matters are being considered carefully by the Assembly, by my Department and by the Department of Health. I believe that the points made by my right hon. Friend are relevant and will be considered in detail as the Care Standards Bill goes through the House.

Farmers (Exchange Rate Compensation)

2. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): When he last met the Minister of Agriculture to discuss compensation for farmers in Wales in relation to the high value of the pound. [118433]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I am in regular and close contact with colleagues in the Cabinet and we discuss a wide range of issues, including the agriculture situation. Compensation for farmers and the high value of sterling were among the matters addressed at the recent agriculture summit chaired by the Prime Minister on 30 March.

Miss McIntosh: Does the Secretary of State agree that the single most important factor in the crisis in farming is the high value of the pound? When will he get the agreement of the Treasury to apply for monetary compensatory amounts to compensate British farmers, given that the pound is overvalued against the currencies of competitor countries in the European Union?

Mr. Murphy: I agree that the value of the pound is vital, and that is why the agriculture summit chaired by the Prime Minister addressed the issue. Of the £25 million of aid that has been given to Welsh farmers, £6 million is to go to sheep farmers, £2 million to beef farmers, and more than £2 million to dairy farmers. All that is to deal with the problems caused by the strength of the pound and will directly help farmers in Wales.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): The National Farmers Union in Wales has greatly welcomed the package for farmers and the Government's commitment to agriculture. However, is my right hon. Friend aware that only 2 per cent. of the lamb consumed by British armed forces abroad is sourced from Wales? Will he endeavour to persuade his ministerial colleagues to adopt the same policy that has been adopted for beef, and source all lamb thus consumed from the United Kingdom?

Mr. Murphy: I shall certainly take up the matter with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. I can tell my hon. Friend that our armed forces are keen to support British products wherever possible, and that all the beef and pork that they use is provided by UK producers. However, I shall ensure that I raise the question of lamb with my Cabinet colleague.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) is this afternoon attending the installation of the high sheriff of Powys, but he and I would both like to know the answer to this question: when and how will the exchange rate compensation be paid to dairy farmers in Wales?

Mr. Murphy: Obviously, the details of that are a matter for the National Assembly, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman as soon as they are known.

Housing Green Paper

3. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones** (Cardiff, Central): What discussions he has had with Assembly Secretaries concerning the implications of the housing Green Paper in Wales. [118434]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I discussed the housing Green Paper with the Assembly Secretary for Local Government and Housing, Mr. Peter Law, in our liaison meeting on 10 April.

Mr. Jones: My hon. Friend will be aware that, in many parts of Wales, such as the wards of Cathays, Plasnewydd and Roath in my constituency, and the constituency of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, there are extremely high densities of houses in multiple occupation. Tenants stay for only a short time, and landlords often do not maintain the houses properly. I welcome the Green Paper's conclusion that it may be possible to introduce a discretionary licensing scheme for local authorities. However, when my hon. Friend holds talks with his colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, will he stress that, unless the licensing schemes cover HMOs used as student lets and areas of high demand as well as areas of low demand, they will be of little or no use to my constituency, or to other similar ones elsewhere in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He often raises with me and with colleagues in the National Assembly issue of student accommodation. I know that he takes a great interest in the matter. The Government are committed to introducing a mandatory licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation as soon as there is an opportunity to do so. In the meantime, we are encouraging local authorities to develop local registration schemes.

I take on board the points raised by my hon. Friend, and I will discuss them with my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Labour Government came to power making extravagant boasts about what they would do about housing in Wales and elsewhere. Given that background, why have they spent less in their first three years in power than the previous Conservative Government spent in their final three years?

Mr. Hanson: I shall defend the Government's record on housing against that of the hon. Gentleman's Government any time that he wants. There has been more investment in Wales and elsewhere as a result of the Government's achievements. The Green Paper outlines further steps for tackling neglect of the housing stock during the Conservatives' 18 years.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): The Green Paper has been warmly welcomed by every agency in Wales involved in the provision of housing, whether private, public or voluntary. Is my hon. Friend aware that elderly people, of whom there are many in my constituency, have difficulties in looking after their properties once they retire? We welcome the near £30,000

allocated for care and repair, but more resources are required, and I ask my hon. Friend to bring that point to the attention of his colleagues.

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend for making those points. The National Assembly recognises the need to improve and maintain housing stock in Wales. The Assembly has announced provision of £48 million to support strategic housing schemes and is undertaking a range of measures to support housing in Wales. The partnership between the Government and the National Assembly is tackling housing issues, and we accept that difficulties remain in many places. That work is a stark contrast with what the Conservative party did while it was in office.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): In his discussions with the First Secretary, has the Minister raised the implications of the single-room rent restriction? It results in those under 25 getting into debt and often finding it difficult to get decent accommodation and becoming homeless. Will the restriction be repealed, and if so when?

Mr. Hanson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. Those areas do not fall within my direct responsibilities, but I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my relevant colleague at DETR, and I shall consider those issues in relation to Wales.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): Does my hon. Friend recall that, when the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) was Secretary of State for Wales the number of houses built in Wales fell by more than 3,000 compared with 1994? What are the prospects for housing in Wales in 2000–01?

Mr. Hanson: As a constituency Member of Parliament, I recall that the number of life chance opportunities to receive housing in Wales diminished under the Conservative Administration. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith), the Assembly has announced provision of an additional £48 million to support strategic housing schemes. In partnership with the British Government, the National Assembly will seek to ensure that more properties are available for rent, and for affordable rents. The Government and the Assembly are committed to tackling the housing backlog that the previous Government allowed to build up.

Office Costs

4. **Mr. Eric Pickles** (Brentwood and Ongar): By how much, in real terms, the cost of running his office, or its predecessor, in *(a)* London and *(b)* Cardiff has changed since May 1997. [118436]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): The cost of running the Welsh Office in 1997–98 was £70 million. For 1999–2000, the cost of running the Wales Office is estimated to be around £2 million. Costs in London and Cardiff are not held separately.

Mr. Pickles: That is a most interesting answer, and one difficult to comprehend against a virtual doubling of Welsh Office staffing. People want the answers to two questions: how were those accounting figures arrived at, and how can the right hon. Gentleman justify costing more and delivering less?

Mr. Murphy: Most people in Wales want to know whether their interests are properly represented in Westminster and Whitehall. On the hon. Gentleman's specific points, the figure of 26 staff for my office, which was suggested before devolution, was an early rough estimate. When I became Secretary of State, the staff complement was 37, and I expect it to be around 45 by the summer. The figure of 58, which is in the annual report, is a notional one. That number is allowed for in the budget, but I shall ensure that every post is subject to the closest scrutiny before any appointment is made. It is vital that Wales is properly represented at Westminster, and that can be done only if my office is adequately staffed. It is the smallest Department in Westminster, and is smaller than some district council chief executive's departments in Wales.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Conservative central office costs the taxpayer £3 million in Short money? Does he agree that the Wales Office offers the taxpayers of Britain a much better bargain?

Mr. Murphy: Anything is a better bargain than Conservative central office.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): The Secretary of State is of course aware that the House is considering several important Bills, including the Local Government Bill, the Care Standards Bill and the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, that will affect Wales. How many of his staff have been allocated to ensure that, during the passage of such Bills, sufficient care is taken that they are properly drafted to take into account the needs of the Assembly and that proper amendments are made in Committee?

Mr. Murphy: About 13 of the staff to whom I have referred give advice on the whole range of Government and Assembly policy, and about a dozen are included in the parliamentary branch and as special advisers. In addition, a part-time legal adviser deals with such matters. Furthermore, officials are seconded from the Assembly to deal with legislation.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Secretary of State will have to give the House a better explanation of his staffing levels than he has done to date. Page 11 of the annual report states that the number of his staff is going up from 34 to 61. Even if that is a notional figure and the number rises only to 58, that is one heck of an increase.

Page 9 of the White Paper "A Voice for Wales" states:

> The Secretary of State will retain a small team of civil servants to support his work.

That was the White Paper on which the people of Wales voted in the referendum. Will the right hon. Gentleman fully explain to the House why there has been such a U-turn?

Mr. Murphy: I have already explained to the House the importance of maintaining a staff that is adequate and satisfactory, both to protect the devolution settlement and to liaise with Cardiff. By no stretch of the imagination could the number of people employed in my Department—they include messengers, paper handlers, receptionists and drivers—be regarded as big. What is important are the big issues with which we are dealing at present—including the question of the children's commissioner, on which I note that the hon. Gentleman did not want to comment. Such issues are hugely important—that is what matters to the people of Wales.

Mr. Evans: The Government must have known all that before the devolution referendum. We accept that the Secretary of State now has one fewer Minister in his Department, but the number of special advisers has doubled, and the number of his staff will double. Furthermore, the Welsh Assembly grows like Topsy, with four special advisers for its First Secretary. The cost of the Welsh Assembly building—thank goodness, that is on hold—was initially estimated at between £12 million and £17 million; it is now between £26 million and £30 million. Will the right hon. Gentleman reconsider the additional costs for staff in his office? That money could supply 30 extra police or 70 extra nurses. Is it not far better to invest money in front-line services to help the people of Wales, rather than pampering the Secretary of State's virility by boosting the Murphy empire in London?

Mr. Murphy: Empire! I am not much of an emperor. If the hon. Gentleman is talking about helping front-line services in Wales, perhaps he should refer, for example, to the £112 billion extra for the health service that came from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's recent Budget. However, a more important point in the context of his remarks is that either he wants Wales to be represented at the Cabinet table and on 22 Cabinet Committees and wants the House to take Welsh legislation seriously, or he does not. Obviously, he does not.

Rural Communities

6. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): When he last met the First Secretary to discuss the Government's legislative programme and its impact on rural communities in Wales. [118439]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the First Secretary regularly and we discuss a range of issues. In addition, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales and I presented the Government's legislative programme during two plenary sessions of the National Assembly for Wales in November and December last year.

Mr. Winterton: Does the Secretary of State accept that the hard-pressed rural areas of Wales rely mainly on agriculture for their existence? Although he has announced some additional help, which is very welcome and wholly justified, does he accept that further assistance is required for those areas? Does he also accept that the caning of the motorist through Government policies does not help those areas where farmers rely entirely on their own transport and where most of their equipment is petrol or diesel-driven?

Mr. Murphy: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about the importance of agriculture to our rural areas. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer addressed transport matters in the Budget in terms of the fuel duty escalator. The Government have also given help to hill farmers, beef farmers and dairy farmers. The Assembly is helping Wales through the rural development plan. The combination of the Government's policies and those of the Labour-led administration in Cardiff are suiting the rural areas of Wales well, and they could not have obtained a better deal.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I welcome the addition last night of new clause 1 to the Postal Services Bill, which will provide possible financial support for post offices when they move to automated credit transfer. It will provide an important safety net, especially for rural post offices. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that, in his discussions with the First Secretary, the Welsh Assembly is fully involved in drafting the detail of how the financial support will operate?

Mr. Murphy: I give my hon. Friend that assurance. I shall raise the matter with the First Secretary when we next meet. I agree with my hon. Friend that rural post offices in Wales play a vital role in our communities. As he knows, we are updating our post office network through a major investment in automation. It is untrue to maintain that people in Wales will not be able to receive cash benefits in post offices after 2003. The Cabinet Office is soon to report on rural post offices, including those in Wales. I am pleased to say that, yesterday, the House approved what was then new clause 1, which will allow subsidies to be paid to post offices in Wales.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Legislation for Wales is enacted in the House. The First Secretary and his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), whom I am pleased to see in his place, are both Members of this place. Will the Secretary of State tell the House when those Labour Members who sit both in the House and in the Welsh Assembly will participate in the Government's legislative programme? The latest figures show that the hon. Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek) and the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies) have attended half time in Cardiff and have not voted once in the House since the summer. The First Secretary and his predecessor have voted only seven or eight times. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House when the by-elections will be held and when the people of Wales will be properly represented in the Government's legislative programme?

Mr. Murphy: I am not quite sure what that has to do with rural areas and the original question. What right hon. and hon. Members do in this context is their own business. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, when the general election comes, those Members who hold a dual mandate will lose it. They will then concentrate on the National

Assembly for Wales. Before the hon. Gentleman bandies his figures, he should take account of some of the figures that appeared in the list in *The Western Mail*. The Conservative Member who represented Clwyd, North-West, who is now an Assembly Member, came bottom of that list.

Transport Bill

7. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): What representations he made to his Cabinet colleagues on the second report of the Welsh Affairs Committee Session 1999–2000 on "The Transport Bill and its Impact on Wales" (HC 287); and if he will make a statement. [118440]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I have discussed this matter with ministerial colleagues. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport, whose Department has responsibility for the Bill, is replying to the Committee on behalf of Government. The Wales Office has been consulted on the content of this reply.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the Minister for that reply. He will know that the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs canvassed the views of the National Assembly for Wales on the Transport Bill. It said that it wanted at least two Welsh members on the Strategic Rail Authority pro tem. We understood that the protocol was that the Minister would take the matter forward with Cabinet Ministers. Why is nothing happening?

Mr. Hanson: The Wales Office has taken forward a number of issues that the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs has raised. We have taken on board the duty to consult the Assembly on the SRA member and on policies. We have also taken on board other issues. Wales has one member out of 15, which is on a par with Scotland. Anne Hemingway, who has been appointed, has been welcomed by the Assembly's Secretary with responsibilities for transport. I hope that the hon. Gentleman recognises that it is important now that the SRA gets on with the business of managing and supporting our railways, and that he is happy with, and supportive of, the member who has been appointed in consultation with the Assembly.

Dairy Farming

8. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): When he will next meet the Agriculture Secretary to discuss Welsh dairy farming. [118441]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): As I have said to the House, the agricultural summit that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister chaired earlier this month agreed on agrimonetary compensation worth about £2.3 million to Welsh dairy farmers. Other measures have also been introduced.

Mr. Fabricant: That sounds like a very big deal, but does it not cost 2p a pint more to produce milk in Wales than the money actually received at the farm gate? Is the Secretary of State aware that, when translated into real money, the announcement that he has just made is the equivalent to a subsidy of only 0.2 per cent. of 1p per pint? Is that not another example of a big Labour announcement and a small and ineffectual delivery?

Mr. Murphy: What is a big deal in Wales for dairy farmers is not only the £2.3 million to which I have just referred. It is also the removal of dairy hygiene charges, which is worth £180,000; it is the Assembly helping with marketing, processing and productivity for supermarkets; it is meetings in Cardiff with the Agriculture Secretary and it is the establishment of a dairy helpline that was recently set up to give advice to farmers. In addition to that, £15 million extra has been given to Welsh farmers to sustain them in these difficult times. That is why the farming unions in Wales have warmly welcomed the package, which is more than the hon. Gentleman has done.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [118462] **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 April.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The brutal deaths in Zimbabwe bring home to us all the fragility of basic human rights around the world. Is the Prime Minister still "comfortable" with the Russian President, Mr. Putin, whose actions in Chechnya to win votes dwarf anything yet tried by the Mugabe regime? Is the Prime Minister still comfortable with Mr. Putin, whose attack in London on Muslims was couched in such fascist terms? If the Prime Minister is still comfortable with Mr. Putin, why should any of us still feel comfortable with this Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: First, I was pleased that President Putin came to this country; I think that it is an important relationship. We made clear our concerns over human rights in Chechnya and those concerns were expressed very forcefully to him. However, I also said—and I believe it—that it is better that we remain engaged with Russia rather than isolate it. I believe that that is the view of the overwhelming majority of the international community. I find it curious that members of today's Conservative party do not want us to welcome President Putin here from Russia; they do not want us to welcome the President of China here; they no doubt do not make any European leaders very welcome, and when we have closer relations with the Americans we are the Americans' poodle. I do not think that Conservative foreign policy is a very good basis upon which to conduct the foreign policy of this country.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Monday's announcement of £100 million of state aid to the British coal industry, following hard on the heels of an extra £200 million of assistance to

British farmers, demonstrates clearly to the people of a constituency such as Selby—which happens to have 3,000 farmers and 3,000 miners—that this Government, unlike some in the 1980s and 1990s, will not pass idly by on the other side of the road when communities are in trouble, but will provide assistance to manage economic change?

The Prime Minister: It is important—particularly if there is a relaxation of the stricter gas consents policy—that we provide finance for the coal industry to go through the period of restructuring in which it is engaged. That helps people with their jobs, and it also helps with a more balanced energy policy for this country. It is right that this Government—in circumstances where industrial restructuring is taking place—stand behind people, help them and work hard for their future.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): The whole House will have been horrified to hear of the brutal murders that have taken place in Zimbabwe in recent days. Given the daily deepening crisis, is it not now clear that the right vehicle for a firm response is the Commonwealth? Is the Prime Minister aware that the Government would have the support of the Opposition for initiating in the Commonwealth decisions on at least the possibility of suspending Zimbabwe and for investigating the possibility of freezing the international assets of Mugabe and his associates?

The Prime Minister: Of course the situation in Zimbabwe is disgraceful and we condemn utterly the barbaric attacks on farmers, which are totally unacceptable. The question is what should be the right response of this country. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are in touch not only with other African leaders in the area, but with people who represent the Opposition and the farmers union in Zimbabwe. It is important to consult those people and take their advice, and we are acting in accordance with that advice.

Of course we are pursuing every avenue open to us at Commonwealth level. A meeting will take place in about 10 days to discuss the action that the Commonwealth will take. It is important that we make sure that the action that Britain takes as a country helps those people in Zimbabwe, and does not make the situation worse for them.

Mr. Hague: Of course I am grateful for the Prime Minister's reply, although many people might think that 10 days is a long time to wait for a Commonwealth meeting when events are moving on by the hour and it must be possible to have an earlier meeting. It is also important to listen to Opposition figures and others in Zimbabwe. However, Mr. Chavanduka, the editor of the *Zimbabwe Standard*, asks:

> How much worse must the situation in Zimbabwe get before action is taken? Words will not affect Mugabe, but pressure from Britain might.

Is not the clear lesson of history that tyranny must always be dealt with firmly? Is it not at such moments that the Commonwealth family of nations comes into its own? Will the Prime Minister try at that meeting, whenever it is held, to initiate a high-level Commonwealth delegation, backed by the threat of a firm response, to try to persuade Mugabe to uphold the rule of law, to end the illegal occupation of farms and to put a stop to intimidation and murder?

The Prime Minister: The meeting is, as I said, taking place in about 10 days, but we have already been in touch with Commonwealth partners, as well as with the United Nations; indeed, the Foreign Secretary spoke to Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary-General, last night. We have also been in detailed touch with Opposition leaders. The leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change rejected a call from the British Conservative Opposition to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth. I point out also that Mr. Tim Henwood, the president of the Commercial Farmers Union in Zimbabwe, has said:

> I call on everyone involved internally and externally to refrain from emotional reaction and interference. Zimbabweans will solve this problem.

There is a difficult balance to strike. I have utterly condemned the situation. Of course I condemn it, and we want to take any action that is helpful to those people in Zimbabwe. Contrary to some reports in the press in the past few days, we are taking action not only at the European Union level—although of course that is important—but at a Commonwealth level and in the United Nations, but it is best that we are guided by those with most to lose, and not by those who are commenting on the situation from a safe distance.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The House will welcome the Prime Minister's measured response to this delicate, difficult situation. The Leader of the Opposition has referred to the rule of law. The Prime Minister has referred to the United Nations, the European Union and Commonwealth countries. Will he give the House an assurance that he and his Government will take a positive lead to ensure that the rule of law is restored in Zimbabwe?

The Prime Minister: Of course we will do so. However, as I pointed out a moment ago, we will do so in the way that is most helpful to the people in Zimbabwe.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): The whole House will share the sense of revulsion about the murderous events in Zimbabwe. Does the Prime Minister concur that talk of sanctions at this time could only help to solidify President Mugabe's position and allow him to return to his rhetoric about colonialism and external threat, and to make a dangerous situation worse? Will the Prime Minister confirm that the real priority for the Foreign Office and the Government is to get President Mugabe to return to his senses on this issue and agree to a restoration of the rule of law, stop the incitement to violence from the top and, most important, sign up internationally, in front of the global community, to a firm date for full and free democratic elections?

The Prime Minister: Those are sensible propositions. That is precisely what we should be doing and it is what we shall do.

Mr. Kennedy: I thank the Prime Minister for that reply. There might yet prove to be a need for an asylum option for some of those who are under threat, either opposition politicians or farmers. As this country

historically and internationally has a proud and noble tradition of offering asylum, will the Prime Minister assure the House that, if any opposition politicians or farmers from Zimbabwe come to this country, they will not be greeted by a detention camp, as the Conservatives have proposed?

The Prime Minister: There are abuses of the asylum system, and we are dealing with those abuses. However, I agree that it is important that we all deal with that issue in a responsible manner.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does my right hon. Friend agree that today is an historic day for millions of disabled people in Britain, with the introduction of the Disability Rights Commission? Will he join me in congratulating the commission and its chair, Bert Massie, who today made it clear that, either by force of argument or by force of law, the commission will ensure that never again will disabled people in Britain be regarded as second-class citizens?

The Prime Minister: It would not be right to welcome the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission without also paying tribute to my right hon. Friend and all the work that he has done over many years for disabled people. The essence of the proposal, which we as a Government were proud to introduce, is to ensure that disabled members of our society are full and equal participating members of that society. We are proud that that is so.

Q2. [118463] **Rev. Martin Smyth** (Belfast, South): Does the Prime Minister agree that people's confidence in politics is often undermined by politicians' deceptive use of language and their economy with the facts?

The Prime Minister: Of course I do.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Consequent to the reference made by the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) to politicians' use of language, will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in commending the Home Secretary who, last week, gave indefinite right of entry to a Kurdish boy in my constituency who, last year, at the age of 13, escaped from Iraqi murderers and torturers to arrive in this country? Which does my right hon. Friend regard as preferable: that the boy should have been allowed to await the decision of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in my constituency with his elder brother, who already has refugee status; or that he should have been put in a prison camp, as the leader of the Conservative party proposes?

The Prime Minister: I think that my right hon. Friend's point is that it is important to make a distinction. As I said, there are real abuses of the asylum system and we have to deal with those abuses. That was the purpose of the legislation introduced last year and it is the purpose of the measures that we are taking now. However, this country should always be willing to take in those who are genuinely fleeing persecution. That is a noble tradition of ours and I, for one, would not like to see it disappear.

Q3. [118464] **Sir Robert Smith** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Given that three sub-post offices have recently closed in my constituency and that last night the Postal Services Bill was amended so that the Secretary of State may take powers to devise a scheme to maintain the sub-post office network, will the Prime Minister say when those powers will be taken and what the detailed contents of the scheme will be, so that those who have to invest in such a vital service to my community know when they can do so?

The Prime Minister: That is precisely the reason why we have a process in place that allows us to discuss with sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses the need to ensure that post offices have a viable future. The powers taken under the legislation add a further dimension, by allowing us to ensure that they have a future. As I said last week, of course there has to be change and of course post offices will do new things in future. Inevitably, larger numbers of people will want to receive their benefits—whether child benefit or their pension—through their bank account. We are sitting down with the parties now and working out a programme for the future. That is the right way to proceed.

Q4. [118465] **Mr. Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North): While I do not doubt that the Prime Minister is as pleased as any Member of Parliament by the drop in the unemployment figures announced today and by yesterday's announcement that long-term interest rates are at their lowest for 35 years, does he accept that his Government will be judged not by those things but by the way in which they improve the standard of living of poor and middle-income families, who suffered so much under the Conservatives?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that employment is up to a new record level of 27.8 million. Well over 800,000 more people are in work today than when we came to office; 420,000 young people have joined the new deal, with more than 190,000 of them in jobs; and long-term and youth unemployment are down by 70 per cent. since the election. That is a Labour Government delivering for the British people.

Q5. [118466] **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): Why has the Prime Minister refused to take any action over a clear breach of the ministerial code by the Deputy Prime Minister? Is it not absurd to have delegated that matter to be resolved by the Deputy Prime Minister himself?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says at all.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that people and political parties who go around stirring up issues relating to the plight of asylum seekers in Britain breed only intolerance and disharmony in our society, and that we, along with everyone in this nation, should seek a society that is more tolerant to the plight of those individuals?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, the problem with the asylum system is being sorted out by the measures that the Government have taken, but it is important to remember that the problem is not exclusive to Britain—it occurs throughout Europe. Although one would not know it to read

some of the information in the media on the subject, Britain is around ninth out of 15 in terms of the number of asylum applications per head; Germany has more asylum seekers than us; in Switzerland the numbers have doubled; in Belgium and Austria they have tripled; and, as I discovered last night in the course of other conversations in Ireland, asylum seekers are a problem there too. It is important to recognise that it is a problem that we need to deal with. We are dealing with it, but—this is the point that my hon. Friend rightly makes—it should be dealt with in a reasonable, responsible and tolerant manner.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Will the Prime Minister confirm that, in the financial year just ended, the Government spent £633 million more on the cost of administration in Whitehall than even they had planned, and that the cost of running No. 10 Downing street rose by 23 per cent. in a single year?

The Prime Minister: I notice that the right hon. Gentleman did not want to raise the issue of asylum.

On the cost of central Government, the right hon. Gentleman is wrong. In real terms, the costs of Government are falling and are less than they were in the last year of the previous Government.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister says that I am wrong, but these are the Government's figures published by the Government last week. The right hon. Gentleman is spending £10 million on his own office. These figures are available for £15.30. He says that the costs of Government are falling in real terms, but when inflation is 2 per cent. and his costs in No. 10 Downing street go up by 23 per cent., how can they be falling in real terms?

The truth is that this is a Government who spend more money each year on spin doctors, political advisers and bureaucracy, and nowhere more so than in No. 10 Downing street. Will he now confirm that, for the first time in a quarter of a century, the Government plan more civil servants this year than last year, and that the costs of running the Lord Chancellor's Department have increased by £106 million?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept that. Again, in real terms, the cost of Government is falling. The percentage costs of Government are lower than when the right hon. Gentleman was in office. The right hon. Gentleman is simply dealing with cash money, not real-terms figures, as he knows perfectly well. If we take the real-terms figures, we are spending less. As for the money in No. 10 Downing street—*[Interruption.]* I am just informed by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that there has been a threefold increase in the Opposition's Short pot, so when the right hon. Gentleman gets to his feet for the third time, he can offer us our first spending cut.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister will not answer the question. He says that he does not accept the figures, but they are the Chancellor of the Exchequer's figures. How has the Lord Chancellor spent £100 million? He cannot have spent it all on wallpaper. *[Interruption.]* Instead of conferring with the Home Secretary, will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government plan the first increase in the number of civil servants in a quarter of a century, and that the cost of running the Department of Trade and Industry has risen by £114 million in three years?

The Prime Minister: No, I will not confirm that. Why does the right hon. Gentleman raise the matter? I shall explain: he has a big hole in his tax and spending plans, so he runs around the country claiming that if he gets rid of a few special advisers he can rebuild the health service and cut everyone's taxes. He has said that he will cut everyone's taxes, spend the same amount of money, and spend even more on defence, farmers, local government—and asylum to judge from yesterday's reports. He makes his pathetic attempt at the Dispatch Box because Haguenomics is beginning to be found out. By the time we get through with the Conservative party in the next general election, the right hon. Gentleman's economic policy will be in ruins along with his party.

Mr. Hague: So, the right hon. Gentleman will not confirm the figures; he does not like the figures—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hague: So now we know—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. That does not mean the noise can start again.

Mr. Hague: Now we know that the Lord Chancellor spends an extra £100 million, and the Prime Minister does not know why; the Department of Trade and Industry spends £114 million more, and he does not know why; the Home Office spends £440 million more, and he does not know why. According to the Government's own figures, they spend £2,000 million more on pen pushers, not police; on bureaucrats, not teachers; on spin doctors, not real doctors. The Government tax so much more, but deliver so much less.

The Prime Minister: All I can say on value for money is that if the right hon. Gentleman gets three times the amount of Short money, he should get better advice.

Under this Government, the number of nurses is up; the number of doctors is up; the number of teachers is up. The only thing that is going down is the Tory party.

Hon. Members: More!

Madam Speaker: Not today.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I agree with my right hon. Friend that the number of nurses is up. I went to my local pathology department in Huddersfield royal infirmary last week—I hope that my right hon. Friend will find time to visit it. It was clear from my visit that the Labour Government arrived not a day too soon to provide much-needed investment. The 8.75 per cent. in cash terms—more than 7 per cent. in real terms—is a genuine investment, and the modernisation fund is also important to departments such as pathology departments. What

advice would my right hon. Friend give the Huddersfield royal infirmary and other trusts when they apply to the modernisation fund this month?

The Prime Minister: The modernisation fund is an important part not only of getting more nurses into the health service but of ensuring that we modernise facilities. That is why all the accident and emergency departments in the country are being modernised if they wish. The Opposition, through their medical insurance plans and their refusal to support the increases in tobacco duty, have a £1.5 billion hole in their accounts. If they were re-elected, there would be fewer nurses and less modernisation in the national health service. That is one very good reason why it is not safe in their hands and never has been.

Q6. [118467] **Mr. Peter Viggers** (Gosport): Is the Prime Minister able to reassure disillusioned pensioners that Blairism has succeeded, or are the press reports true which say that his party has effectively written off pensioners as a group worth cultivating?

The Prime Minister: No, they are not true at all. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman what we have done for pensioners: there is an extra £6.5 billion of spending; 1 million pensioners are benefiting from the minimum income guarantee; pensioner households have the £150 winter fuel allowance, and there are free eye tests for those pensioners as well; value added tax on fuel has been cut; and the over-75s in his constituency will have free television licences. Of course pensioners want us to do even more, but the one thing they should know is that if they ever got a Conservative Government back, those changes would be reversed and that money taken off them.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): My right hon. Friend is aware that I have the honour to represent a number of survivors of the Nazi holocaust. Does he agree that many of those who find safety in this country contribute to the well-being and richness of our nation? Does he share my view that there is nothing at all patriotic about threatening to incarcerate every asylum seeker while campaigning for the freedom of dictators such as Pinochet?

The Prime Minister: Again, let me emphasise what we are doing to tackle abuses. We are speeding up the process and 11,000 decisions are being taken in a month. We are hiring extra immigration officials—another 700. The new changes such as the withdrawal of cash benefit and the introduction of fines for hauliers who take part in illegal immigration will enable us to tighten up the system and make sure that those who abuse it are not allowed to do so; but I say to my hon. Friend, as I said to the House a moment or two ago, there is a duty on us all to treat this issue responsibly and not inflame or exploit it. We need to tackle the abuses of the system. We are doing that, but we should never turn our backs on those fleeing persecution and we should never put at risk our reputation as a tolerant, multiracial society. We should be proud of it.

Q7. [118468] **Mr. Richard Spring** (West Suffolk): On top of the highest petrol prices in Europe and a collapse in farm incomes, is the Prime Minister aware of the impact in a rural area such as Suffolk of council tax increases of four times the rate of inflation? The county council has put the tax up by 28 per cent. over the three years since he took office. To whom does he ascribe that huge increase—central Government or the county council, which is Labour led but propped up by his friends, the Liberal Democrats?

The Prime Minister: First, I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that the average council tax is less in Labour areas than in Conservative areas. Secondly, under the previous Government there was a 19 per cent. council tax increase in the few years before we took office. In relation to the countryside and farmers, we announced a package that included both short-term aid and long-term help for the farming industry, but demands for extra spending made in the House do not sit well in the mouths of Conservative Members who tell their constituents that they will cut everybody's taxes. At some point, as we discovered with the Leader of the Opposition earlier, they will have to make a choice.

Q8. [118469] **Mr. James Plaskitt** (Warwick and Leamington): Health service funding in Warwickshire has increased by £60 million since the general election—a 30 per cent. increase in cash terms. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any party that claimed that it could sustain such increased investment in health care while cutting taxes, regardless of the economy's performance, would be all mouth and no credibility?

The Prime Minister: It is the Conservative party's position that it would reintroduce private medical insurance measures, which would be an immediate £500 million cost just for those who already have it. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members shake their heads, but that is their policy. At some point, if they want to be taken seriously, they should start defending it openly. They would spend less money on health, and their tax and spending plans do not add up, but the important thing is that, having sorted out the public finances and laid the foundations of a stable economy, we are able to make an extra investment in the health service—not only this year, but in succeeding years as well. That is why I can tell the House the latest figures on nurses: 5,500 more nurses have come back to nursing and the number of student nurses has risen from 11,200 to 16,000. We are laying the foundations for a better-staffed health service for the future.

Q9. [118470] **Mr. John Burnett** (Torridge and West Devon): Rural fire services have vast areas to cover and they are under constant financial pressure. They are essential services that we all value. Does the Prime Minister agree that it would be in the interests of council tax payers if fire authorities, like the police, were separate precepting authorities for the purposes of that tax?

The Prime Minister: I know that in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and in many others people want additional spending, but the Liberal Democrats cannot carry on asking for more and more spending without saying where that money would come from. If they say that there should be more spending, it is important that they are honest about their tax plans. The hon. Gentleman talks about a separate precept as if that meant nothing. He presumably wants a separate precept so as to raise the amount of money taken from it.

In the past few weeks, the Liberal Democrats have called for more spending on pensioners and health, more spending on post offices, more spending on farming, more spending on incapacity benefit, more spending on buses, railways, the environment and housing, more spending for nurseries, schools and universities, more spending on the countryside, the regions and inner cities, more spending on benefits and more spending on police. At some point in time, the word "credibility" should enter the Liberal Democrat dictionary.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In March this year, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions issued to outside organisations guidelines on full local transport plans. That document has been made widely available to outside organisations, including motoring organisations, but it is not available in the Vote Office. I serve on the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, and it is valid to make the point that this document should have been circulated to all members of that Committee, and should be available at least in the Vote Office.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. As the House knows only too well, I am most vigilant in seeking to ensure that Ministers meet their obligations to Parliament. On this occasion, I have no criticism to make of the Department's activities. The issuance of guidance on full local transport plans, to which she referred, was announced in a written answer on 27 March, and a copy of the document was placed in the Library. It is a matter of ministerial discretion whether copies of documents of this nature are also placed in the Vote Office, taking account of a document's significance, the likely interest in it and resource constraints.

In this case, Ministers decided not to place copies in the Vote Office, and I happen to think that that was a reasonable decision. Any Member who has a particular interest in a document is, of course, able to consult it in the Library, to obtain a personal copy through the Vote Office in the usual way, or to call the Department and ask for it.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have given you notice of it.

Madam Speaker: No, I do not have it.

Mr. Heath: I beg your pardon, Madam Speaker. I sent it to your office, and I apologise if it has not reached you.

As you know, Madam Speaker, the Government have announced their intention to add a variety of genetically modified maize to the national seed list. I raised this matter in business questions last week, and I seek your guidance. Representations against that addition are governed by regulation 21 of the Seeds (National Lists of Varieties) Regulations 1982, which require people wishing to make a representation to pay a sum of £30 to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and pay an additional £60 if they want to make a direct representation.

I seek your guidance, Madam Speaker, on whether matters of privilege are raised if right hon. or hon. Members of the House want to represent their constituencies and feel strongly about this matter, but have no way of raising it, because it is not part of any business before the House—except by providing a £30 cheque, which I have done.

Madam Speaker: I did not receive notice of the hon. Gentleman's point of order, but that does not matter; I shall try to deal with it in any case.

The hon. Gentleman raised the question of privilege, which means that I must consider his point of order immediately and give him a written answer. I shall do so now that I have heard what he had to say.

BILL PRESENTED

School Admissions (Amendment)

Mr. Paul Burstow, supported by Mr. Tom Brake, Mr. Edward Davey, Dr. Jenny Tonge, Mr. Simon Hughes and Dr. Vincent Cable, presented a Bill to amend the law relating to school admission arrangements for maintained schools to allow admission authorities to give precedence to pupils seeking admission who live within the area of the local education authority; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on 5 May, and to be printed [Bill 116].

Concessionary Parking Scheme (Extension)

3.35 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require local authorities to extend concessionary parking arrangements available to disabled people to health and social services professionals on duty.

The Bill would also include carers when they are on duty.

Carers provide disadvantaged members of society, whether they are elderly, infirm or disabled, with the dignity of living at home. They also fill the gap left by cash-strapped social services departments, which have such strict criteria that ill, handicapped or frail people needing less than seven days care a week are rarely given any help. That is where organisations such as Pramacare in my constituency come in. That charity gives help and care to more than 500 clients a week, allowing them to stay independent in their own homes.

Those involved in the care sector have received precious little help and support from the present Government, who in the last Session failed to back a private Member's Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) which would have given community bus schemes a rebate on the fuel that they use. That would have drastically cut costs for those who operate bus services for elderly and disabled people, providing them with a means of getting out of the house.

The problem of parking, on which I shall focus, has been highlighted by the Royal College of Nursing, which has said:

Community nurses, health visitors and midwives find parking a particularly vexing issue.

One of our members (who is a midwife) recently reported that when she was attending an unanticipated and sudden home delivery, she received a parking ticket which the council refused to retract despite her explanation. She was not alone in her complaints about this problem.

This is where my Bill comes in. It would require local authorities to extend the concessionary parking arrangements available to disabled people to include registered health and social service professionals and carers when on duty. That would aid all carers, but especially those dealing with people living on busy roads or with little parking provision. The problem is extremely widespread: the RCN has given me numerous examples of the parking difficulties experienced by its members and others.

Under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, a badge may be issued to a disabled person in the area of the issuing authority for any vehicle that he or she drives. Displaying the badge allows that person to park in areas that are usually restricted—for example, on double yellow lines. Under the Act, a badge may also be issued to an institution concerned with care of the disabled for any motor vehicle used by or on behalf of the institution to carry disabled persons of any prescribed description.

The problem arises when a carer or a health professional, such as a health visitor, district nurse or midwife, is called out and has to find and pay for a valid parking space, thus wasting valuable time. A spokesman for the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association said:

I can't tell you how strongly our members feel about this. Some are having to park illegally or a long way away from their home visit.

She continued:

there are three problems: having to search for a space can reduce client contact time; there may also be health and safety issues with nurses staggering around with heavy bags . . . it's very common for community nurses to have to fork out for parking, which often isn't reimbursed.

My Bill would allow members of accredited agencies while on duty to park directly outside the house or block of flats in which their patients live, whether or not there are parking restrictions such as double yellow lines or residents permit requirements. In my constituency, Poole councillor Mrs. Ann Stribley has persuaded the borough's social services of the merits of the scheme, and Pramacare's helpers are now permitted to park on yellow lines when visiting the homes of people in their care if no other suitable slot is available.

As Pramacare's appeals chairman, a position that I duly registered when I was elected to the House and that is unremunerated—I do the job voluntarily—I know how well the scheme has worked. Its merits should be available in every other constituency.

Of course, I do not expect local authorities to issue individual permits to each and every carer operating within their boundary. My Bill proposes that concessionary parking disks be issued to accredited agencies, with a local authority overseeing the process. The number of disks and the precise conditions attached to their use should be for those authorities to decide in the light of local needs and circumstances. I make it clear at this early stage that any sustained abuse of the concession by an individual or organisation could lead to permits being withdrawn.

As an advocate of legislation to address delays caused by street works, the last thing that I want is to cause more congestion because vehicles have been thoughtlessly parked, or left on yellow lines for an unnecessarily prolonged period. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a genuine need to help community-based health visitors and carers to do their jobs without the pressure of seeking somewhere to leave their cars. The scheme must be seen to benefit those who are doing their jobs in the community and whose time is too precious to be wasted.

May I briefly mention the technicalities of the Bill? Local authorities are already obliged under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act to maintain a register showing the holders of badges issued. Grouping carers' permits under the umbrella of the organisation for which they work, will ensure that the administrative cost of extending the register to those included within the Bill will be nominal.

That approach will address the fact that neither a local authority nor the umbrella organisation may be able to plan for specific numbers of employees in advance. We need to build in some flexibility of approach so that the scheme does not become tedious or costly to administer, or create problems for those whom its seeks to help. The good cause must be seen in the light of the cost that the Government were willing to impose for replacing the orange badge with a new European model blue badge, which came into effect on 1 April.

As I have said, use of the badges must be properly restricted to those who genuinely qualify under my proposals and they must be allowed to use them only for their intended purpose. The permits would remain the property of the local authority so that they could be withdrawn if used improperly.

I hope that Members who are present and the Government will agree that the Bill is vital to a sector of the community on whose dedication and care we may all one day have cause to call. I urge the House to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Christopher Fraser, Mr. John Bercow, Miss Julie Kirkbride, Dr. Julian Lewis, Mr. David Prior, Mr. Andrew Robathan, Mr. Anthony Steen, Mr. Desmond Swayne, Mr. Ian Taylor and Mr. Andrew Tyrie.

Concessionary Parking Scheme (Extension)

Mr. Christopher Fraser accordingly presented a Bill to require local authorities to extend concessionary parking arrangements available to disabled people to health and social services professionals on duty: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 12 May, and to be printed [Bill 117].

Orders of the Day

Utilities Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

3.43 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I do not want to delay matters, but I wonder whether I could seek your guidance on a matter of record and on how the House is supposed to follow proceedings when the Government keep chopping and changing a particular Bill.

At column 730 of the 11 April report of the Standing Committee, a new clause that I drafted to consolidate the Bill is clearly marked as having been agreed to by a vote of nine to three. However, I am reliably informed by colleagues who were there that it was withdrawn. The problem is not that, after great running around, I have been able to get to the bottom of that; it is simply that people outside this place have the greatest difficulty following the Bill.

The matter is particularly relevant to today's recommittal motion, which I hope the Government will accept. The Bill has been a mess from start to finish, and the poor people outside the House who will be affected by its provisions have not had a chance to keep us informed of what they want us to do.

Madam Speaker: I shall not comment on the Bill's contents, as that is, of course, not my role. However, if it helps the hon. Gentleman, and particularly those of whom he speaks, I can make it clear that, as he said, there was—I can put it no higher or lower—a considerable printing muddle in parts of the *Hansard* to which he referred. I make it clear to him and to those whom he mentioned that that does not affect today's passage of the Bill.

3.45 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I beg to move,

That the Bill be re-committed to the former Committee.

The Utilities Bill has been unprecedented in Department of Trade and Industry Ministers' failure to know what is going on in other Departments, and it is unprecedented in the way in which the Government have handled its passage through Parliament. From the very beginning, it was clear that the Bill was poorly and hastily drafted—consultation was still taking place on the policy underlying the Bill. The press reported that 900 Government amendments were still required to the 134-clause Bill. The explanatory notes admitted that

the Government intends to bring forward amendments later in the passage of the Bill

to give effect to a long list of measures that the Government still intended to include in the Bill, the clauses for which had not been drafted.

The Utilities Bill is not an insignificant Bill. Initially, it was intended to provide a new regulatory framework for all four main utilities—gas, electricity, water and telecommunications. The new framework would impose new duties and liabilities on the utilities sectors that would increase the regulatory risk to those capital-intensive companies. It would provide for a new £0.75 billion

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

electricity trading arrangement and for separation of the licences for electricity distribution and supply. It is a framework that would provide for limitless fines. This is no insignificant Bill.

The Bill was heralded as a flagship Bill of this Session, and it will provide the regulatory framework for many years to come. However, despite its importance, from the very start it has been handled with amateurish incompetence. The Bill that we are considering today bears very little resemblance to the Bill that left the Chamber after Second Reading at the end of January.

In Committee, the Government tabled 359 amendments to the Bill. Many of them were tabled on a just-in-time basis, with the ink barely dry. The Government have tabled an additional 22 amendments for today's debate. We understand that they plan to table yet more amendments when the Bill is considered in another place. Despite that, the Government have still not sought to legislate on categories mentioned in the explanatory notes. We had the Committee's notorious ninth sitting on 2 March, when the Government announced that they were removing from the Bill all clauses dealing with the water and telecommunications sectors.

Water was removed from the Bill because of a turf war between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions over policy, and the fact that DETR would be introducing its own water Bill later in the year. Telecommunications was removed because of the industry's outcry that a change in the regulatory structure would be imposed on it within two years of a further major upheaval after the telecommunications White Paper is published in the autumn. It beggars belief that a Government who claim to be up to speed with dot.com should have treated telecommunications like a sitcom. Nothing more clearly demonstrates the shambles at the heart of Government policy than their handling of utilities regulation.

As a result of the removal of those clauses, the so-called Utilities Bill was confined to dealing with gas and electricity. However, by the ninth sitting, clauses relating to telecommunications had already been passed. Those clauses—now clauses 101 to 105—remain in the Bill, despite the fact that telecommunications are no longer part of the legislation. The Government are seeking to delete those clauses today.

The Bill had half of its major provisions removed and some 359 Government amendments were tabled—of which some 260 were accepted—yet it still requires further amendment by the Government today and at later stages. It bears no resemblance to the measure that was originally drafted. To make matters worse, a number of the more substantial clauses were tabled by the Government in a way that prevented members of the Standing Committee from scrutinising them properly and from tabling amendments to them.

For example, 56 Government amendments were tabled late on Friday 31 March. The first that Committee members knew of those amendments was on Monday 3 April, by which time it was too late to table further amendments as the clauses were being debated on the following day, Tuesday 4 April. Even more seriously, that gave the interested public no time to examine the amendments and feed in their views to right hon. and hon. Members serving on the Standing Committee.

The Bill is a travesty in terms of democratic representation. Even if the 56 amendments had been tabled on the Thursday, which would have given hon. Members enough time to table amendments, it still would not have been a satisfactory way in which to scrutinise such important legislation. Our procedures have not evolved to deal with substantial re-writes of legislation in Committee without significant notice being given. By convention, there is always a week or more between the Second Reading of a Bill and its consideration in Committee. That enables the public to make representations to Members of Parliament. That convention should also apply to major Government amendments to Bills in Committee, but in this case that convention has been flouted.

Despite an apology from the Government Whip, the same thing happened again with 14 Government new clauses being tabled late on Thursday 6 April for debate on Tuesday 11 April. Once again, they were not available to Committee members until the Friday. Therefore, although it was technically possible to table amendments, in practice there was far too little time for effective consultation or to receive representations. The Electricity Association said:

> We do not have any comments on the new clauses and schedules at this stage other than to say that it is completely unsatisfactory to have significant amendments with far-reaching implications being laid at this stage in the parliamentary process. We will be working up our position on these amendments during the coming week.

British Gas plc said of the new clauses:

> They have been brought forward in a piecemeal way and have not been the subject of any industry consultation.

Yet the Government claim that they listen to business.

During the 22nd sitting of the Standing Committee, the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) about how many more Government amendments the Minister intended to table, said:

> I will undertake during the Committee's deliberations to have a check made on the number of amendments that are likely to be tabled and on what issues.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, Tuesday 4 April 2000; c. 667.]

In other words, it was a matter not for the Minister, but for her civil servants. It was been clear throughout the Standing Committee that Ministers were not properly engaged in the detail of the Bill and that it was very much a case of reading from prepared briefs.

It is clear that the Government have handled the Bill poorly. It is riddled with errors, poor drafting and policy confusion. The Government's handling of the Bill has resulted in many of its amendments being subject to minimal scrutiny by the Standing Committee. Today we are considering a completely different Bill from that which went into Committee. It is our view that the Bill needs to be scrutinised again in Committee before it comes back to the House on Report and Third Reading.

We would add that we are keen to ensure that what is now clause 66 is put on the statute book at the earliest opportunity, to enable the new electricity trading arrangements to start in October this year. Therefore, if the recommittal motion is passed today, we will support the Government if they wish to fast track clause 66 on to the statute book through a separate Bill.

Parliamentary scrutiny is vital in protecting people's freedom from the ever-growing power of the state. That scrutiny has been undermined by the Government during the passage of this important Bill to re-regulate the gas and electricity industries. I urge the House to support the motion to give the Bill the extra scrutiny it requires and to recommit it to Committee.

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I will ask the House to vote against the Opposition's motion to recommit the Bill to Committee for further consideration. I contend that this attempt by the Opposition is a last-ditch effort to deprive consumers of the benefits of this Bill. They are showing yet again that they are the fat cats' friend.

The attack on the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) for his amateurish handling of the Bill was grossly over-exaggerated. He may not have been terribly good, but he spent much of his time in solitary confinement in Committee because his Back Benchers failed to come and support him, and that is an indication of how important this Bill really is to the Opposition.

Furthermore, the hon. Gentleman, who has never knowingly understated anything in his life, repeatedly claimed that there would be 900 amendments to the Bill. More than 700 amendments were tabled in total, of which 303 were Government amendments. Indeed, on the first day in Committee I drew his attention to the activities of the previous Administration who, during the passage of the Companies Act 1989, tabled 400 amendments in the other place and 110 to one part of the Bill on Report. I do not know why the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) is getting so worked up, given that she was a member of that Administration. Indeed, they tabled 60 amendments on the very first day in Committee.

The Opposition have been inconsistent in their handling of this Bill. The hon. Lady attacks the Government for the withdrawal of the telecommunications clauses, despite the fact that on 29 February the hon. Gentleman said that he would help the Government to remove them. It is time that the Opposition started talking to each other.

On Second Reading, the Opposition confirmed their support for the reform of the electricity pool, the merging of the gas and electricity regulators and the establishment of the consumer council. When I asked the hon. Gentleman on 7 March whether he was going back on those commitments to helping to get the Bill on the statute book, he said, "No, of course not." He also said at the last sitting of the Committee that he looked forward to further consideration on Report. Obviously, someone higher in the pecking order has told him that he should not have done so, because of the failure of the Opposition to organise themselves properly in Committee.

It is important that we get this legislation on the statute book as quickly as possible because it will lead to a reduction in wholesale electricity prices of around 10 per cent. Already, in the futures market, we are seeing a 30 per cent. reduction in forward prices for electricity. It is also important that we reverse the set-up under the previous Administration whereby shareholders have priority over consumers. It is important also to take into account the provisions for fuel poverty in this Bill, as well as the provisions for renewables.

4 pm

I contend that the Opposition have tabled this motion in an attempt to keep the Bill off the statute book for as long as possible. They are wasting the valuable time of the House and of those hon. Members who considered the Bill in Standing Committee A. I believe that the Bill is ready to be considered on Report and on Third Reading. I invite the House to vote against the motion for recommittal.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 137, Noes 282.

Division No. 171] **[4 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hood, Jimmy
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Tyler, Paul
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*

Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tony McNulty and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 3

INTERPRETATION

'.—(1) In this Act—

"Authority" means the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority;

"Council" means the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council;

"electricity licence" means a licence under section 6 of the 1989 Act;

"gas licence" means a licence under section 7 or 7A of the 1986 Act;

"the 1986 Act" means the Gas Act 1986;

"the 1989 Act" means the Electricity Act 1989.

(2) Expressions used in this Act, as regards matters relating to gas, and in Part I of the 1986 Act have, unless the context otherwise requires, the same meaning as in that Part of that Act.

(3) Expressions used in this Act, as regards matters relating to electricity, and in Part I of the 1989 Act have, unless the context otherwise requires, the same meaning as in that Part of that Act.'.—*[Mrs. Liddell.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mrs. Liddell: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 1, 2 and 4.

Motion to transfer clause 107.

Government amendment No. 6.

Motion to transfer clause 108.

Government amendments Nos. 8 to 21.

Mrs. Liddell: As I have already made clear, the Bill is an important one for the Government; it provides the basis for pushing ahead with further and more effective competition in energy markets, while ensuring that all consumers, including the disadvantaged, enjoy the benefits of competition in gas and electricity. The Bill also modernises the regulatory framework to accommodate converging gas and electricity markets. It underlines the importance that we attach to improving the transparency, consistency and predictability of regulation as the foundation for better decisions and greater regulatory stability.

Thanks to the efforts of the Committee, nearly all the substantive work is complete. That is why the Government are tabling only two groups of amendments. In each case, we informed the Committee well in advance of our intention to table these amendments on Report.

The first group is technical in nature. As the House is aware, the Government said on 2 March that we were removing from the Bill the provisions relating to water and telecommunications. Soon afterwards, the Committee amended the Bill to remove most of those provisions. We now seek to remove the remaining provisions relating to telecommunications, which were considered by the Committee.

4.15 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce: A fairly limited number of amendments have been tabled on Report. We noticed in Committee that amendments were appearing more slowly than usual because the officials appeared not to be able to keep up. When we have considered the Bill on Report, does the Minister intend to introduce another raft of amendments in the other place? Will she indicate which areas of the Bill the Government still intend to amend before it returns for final consideration in this place?

Mrs. Liddell: It is not the Government's intention to introduce substantive issues in another place. Inevitably there will be other amendments, but we do not intend to table a substantial number on substantive issues. I cannot be more precise than that. The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member, and he knows that the Bill will be examined and that some technical and drafting amendments may have to be tabled in the other place.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What proportion of the new clauses and Government amendments will require the introduction of additional and previously unforeseen regulations? Will the right hon. Lady tell the House whether those regulations, in whole or in part, will be subject to the negative or to the affirmative procedure?

Mrs. Liddell: I am not in a position to tell the hon. Gentleman. I wish to make some progress in the areas covered by the amendments that we have tabled for discussion today. The hon. Gentleman was not a member of the Committee, so I am being more generous to him than I would be to those who attended the Committee's sittings. I shall now move on to the amendments, which are very important.

Amendments Nos. 4, 9 and 11 to 21 remove the remaining provisions relating to telecommunications. Amendment No. 4 deletes clauses 101 to 104, which among other things would have established the Telecommunications Authority and the Telecommunications Consumer Council. Amendments Nos. 9 and 11 to 21 delete consequential references to the authority and the council. The remaining Government amendments all follow from the removal of telecoms provisions and serve to improve the coherence of the Bill after those provisions are removed.

Amendment No. 4, new clause 3 and amendments Nos. 8 and 10 bring together the separate extent and interpretation provisions in clauses 100 and 109.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): In response to the intervention of my hon. Friend the

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), the right hon. Lady said that there were no substantive new clauses to be tabled in another place. Will she say when she intends to table the amendments referred to in the explanatory notes, which refer to

measures consequential on the separation of electricity distribution and supply, including provision for transfer schemes for public electricity supplies?

When will those amendments be tabled?

Mrs. Liddell: Consequential amendments will be tabled in another place under the normal arrangements and through the usual channels.

Amendment No. 10 inserts a single provision stating the extent of the Bill in the final clause. New clause 3 gathers together provisions relating to interpretation, which will be inserted in the final part of the Bill.

Removing telecommunications clauses removes the rationale for separating provisions amending the Gas Act 1986 and the Electricity Act 1989 to give the Competition Commission a veto power following licence modification references in other clauses amending those Acts.

Amendments Nos. 1, 2 and 6, which are linked to the two Government motions, reinsert these provisions unchanged in the appropriate places in chapter IV, which provides for amendment of the Electricity Act 1989, and in chapter V, which provides for amendment of the Gas Act 1986.

Mr. Gibb: I am astonished by the Minister. Is she not embarrassed to introduce this group of amendments when the vast majority of them will remove the remaining telecommunications clauses from the Bill? The question that Conservative Members are asking is why the Government did not know when the Bill was published that the telecommunications industry would be unhappy about being regulated. A White Paper to be published in the autumn will deal with the possibility of regulating the telecommunications industry, and communications and broadcasting in general. Why did Ministers not know about the White Paper before the Bill was published?

Mrs. Liddell: I take it that the hon. Gentleman has a defective memory. He perhaps forgets his offer to assist the Government to remove the telecommunications clauses. He did that specifically because, following changes in the industry, a second White Paper was likely to consider overall telecommunications issues. Can he confirm whether he remembers his offer to help?

Mr. Gibb: The Minister is very tetchy today. She fails to realise that there is a difference between supporting the Government in their attempt to remove the clauses on telecommunications and asking questions about their policy and approach. She should not be so sensitive to criticisms from Members of Parliament. We supported the Government in removing those clauses in Committee.

Mr. Ian Bruce: My hon. Friend will know that my first speech in Committee, and others that I made before the Government removed the telecommunications clauses, urged them to do just that. Before they removed the clauses, Ministers explained why they were necessary—but the House and the telecommunications and water industries have not had a proper answer to the questions that my hon. Friend asks. Our memories are certainly not defective.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Those are important questions, because Ministers must have known that a White Paper on telecommunications and broadcasting would be published this autumn. Why, then, did they include in the Bill all the measures about regulating the telecommunications industry, when the regulatory framework will have to be revamped in a couple of years' time? If they say that they did not know about the White Paper, it is disgraceful that Ministers do not know what is going on in other parts of the Government.

When the clauses were removed, the Minister said that the Government did not think that the telecommunications industry was concerned, but the industry did not know that a White Paper was forthcoming. That was announced in a press release on 4 February. The Government could not have known that the industry was concerned, because the industry did not know about the White Paper. That argument is nonsense. It was incumbent on the Government to inform the industry about the White Paper. Apart from that, the representations made before 4 February made it clear that the Government envisaged re-regulation of broadcasting in due course.

In response to my intervention, the Minister said that the proposals for the transfer scheme for public electricity suppliers were mere consequential amendments. That is a new definition of the term "consequential amendment". I thought that it meant changing references to sections and to the repeals set out in schedules. However, a substantive set of clauses will be required to cover the tax consequences of having to split up the companies that supply and distribute electricity, and we would have liked the opportunity to amend them in Committee. All the subsidiaries involved in the distribution of electricity will have to be separate from those involved in its supply. That means that there will be substantial changes to the ownership of contracts. Taxation consequences will also flow from the split, so the provisions are important. If the Minister claims that they will involve mere consequential amendments, will she spell out in more detail what she means by the other so-called consequential amendments that will be tabled in the other place?

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I appreciate the fact that the Government intend Report to be a tidying-up exercise to follow on from the work of the Standing Committee, of which I was not a member. However, we have an opportunity to revisit some of the basic issues about whether it was wise to decapitate the Bill and remove some of its key elements.

I take a view opposite to that of Conservative Members. I believe that the original structure had much to commend it. There was a good reason for treating the telecommunications, water and energy sectors together. The underlying economic principles for all those industries are the same. In each case, there was an understandable wish to move from monopoly regulation to competition, which is encroaching on all those industries. It is being encouraged, and rightly so. However, in each sector, there was a natural monopoly deriving from the electricity and gas grid, the water

mains system—the backbone system—and the telecommunications system. It seemed eminently sensible to apply a common set of regulatory principles to them all.

The integrated Bill was welcome at the time because it made two significant advances, one of which was to introduce a higher level of social and environmental protection. Consumer groups and those concerned about the environment widely welcomed that. The second advance provided more statutory consumer protection. In the integrated Bill as originally conceived, all those sectors enjoyed additional levels of regulatory protection.

We do not know what will happen now, especially to telecommunications. A White Paper and a Green Paper will be issued, and there will be a new regulatory structure dealing with communications as a whole—probably in two years, although that is not certain. Will the Minister reassure us that the genuine advances in social and environmental obligations and consumer protection in the original Bill will remain in any new communications and water Bills? It is important not to go backwards as a result of the withdrawal of those key elements of the Bill.

I am sure that the answer to my question is yes. However, I am slightly sceptical because I have dealt with other areas of regulation, especially in connection with the Financial Services and Markets Bill, and another Department strongly resisted incorporating social obligations such as those in the Utilities Bill. As an advance has been made, it is important to consolidate it.

I wish to raise a further point about the method of reaching such a decision. Consumer groups have bruised feelings—as Ministers, I am sure, are aware—because when the Bill was originally introduced, they were assured that telecommunications would henceforth enjoy a much stronger system of consumer protection. Many of them were delighted to hear that. Indeed, they issued enthusiastic press releases saying how much they welcomed it—having been encouraged to do so, I believe, by the Department of Trade and Industry. They were then told, without being consulted, that telecommunications were being withdrawn from the Bill. No reason was given for that, but of course the consumer groups were well aware of the pressures from the mobile telephone operators that led to the withdrawal.

Consumer groups are extremely anxious about the way in which the decision was made over their heads. I hope that the Government will give an assurance that the next stage in dealing with telecommunications and water will bring those groups back into the fold, and that they will consult them properly, as they have been overridden and treated rather shoddily.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I shall begin with a declaration of interest. During the passage of the Bill, I have had to give fewer and fewer such declarations as the Government remove more and more from the measure. However, the Bill still makes provision for telecommunications, in which I have some major interests. I am a professional adviser to the Telecommunication Managers Association and my family and I have shares in the gas, water, electricity and telecommunications industries.

In debating this group of amendments, we have an opportunity to probe the Government on the direction in which telecommunications and water are going. My hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) discussed telecommunications, as did the Minister to a certain extent.

However, little has been said about water. I do not quite share the view of Conservative Front Benchers on the necessity or desirability of having a lot of consumer bodies included in a measure that concerns the electricity and gas industries, as I believe that the market is working extremely well. There have been dramatic examples of companies that do not respond to their customers and, in such cases, consumers can go elsewhere. Certainly, the consumer is starting to become king in telecommunications.

By the time that the Bill is enacted, that market will be working even better. The fixed line—the thing that allowed BT to have a virtual monopoly—is increasingly being replaced by mobile telecommunications equipment. Increasingly, in the gas, electricity and telecommunications markets, consumers have a real ability to exercise the ultimate sanction against a supplier—telling the company that they will not use it any more, because they can go to another and get a better deal.

4.30 pm

We have never received a proper explanation of why water was removed from the Bill. The Government were, from the start, reticent about discussing the relevant clauses and they are now having to remove all record of water from the Bill. We understand that there was a turf war with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but the House is entitled to know what the Government intend to do. We understand that Government do not intend to introduce new legislation during the lifetime of the current Government, but intend only to produce a draft proposal at some point in the future, and a Conservative Government will have to decide whether or not to proceed with it. The water industry and water consumers want to know what the Government have in mind. Ministers must share with the House the reasons why it was so difficult to manage those matters and give consumers proper protection.

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe says that the Conservatives are the friends of the fat cats. Currently, the water industry has a regulator who decides prices after negotiations in which the water companies all say that the new prices will be impossible. Afterwards, they come back and say that, even though the pricing structure was impossible, they have made massively increased profits. Having promised the electorate that they would do something about it, the Government have failed to tackle that problem.

It is strange that the right hon. Lady says that the Opposition are trying to delay matters; in fact, two days were originally set aside for Report, but we are having only a half-day debate on the subject. At no time during proceedings on the Bill have the Opposition attempted to filibuster or delay matters. We want only to get on to the real issues, but the real issues have at no time been addressed.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend will be aware that any delays in Committee occurred because the Committee had to wait for amendments to be drafted by the Government draftsmen.

Mr. Bruce: Yes, indeed—I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I see the Government Whip,

[Mr. Bruce]

the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope), who was assiduous in his duties throughout the passage of the Bill through Committee. Perhaps I should put on record how pleased I was by the number of early afternoons I was given. Often, when I expected to be in Committee from 4.30 to 7 pm and to return after dinner, we were told after an hour or so that we would be sent home early because yet another set of Government amendments was not ready.

We did a workmanlike job. I rarely bestow praise on the Liberal Democrats, but I have to say that, occasionally, they turned up. A whole group of amendments was lost because no Liberal Democrat Member was there to move it, however. Perhaps more spectacular was the fact that, when only one Liberal Democrat was there to call "Aye" on a certain group of amendments, the Government allowed the amendments to go through, which shows that they had lost control. Of course, tonight, when we consider a later group of amendments, we will be asked to overturn the Liberal Democrats' victory, and I hope that they intend to protest loudly when that happens.

I digress, however, and I must not. We are in a strange position. The telecommunications industry, the provisions relating to which are about to be deleted from the Bill, has just experienced the highest stealth taxation endured by any industry or body anywhere. In the current round, bidding has reached £25 billion, and that money will come from telecommunication consumers and industry. We can all delight that the Treasury will be stuffed with such money, but the clauses that we are about to delete might have enabled that money to be used to encourage telecommunications and to ensure that the United Kingdom is the best place in which to do e-business. That issue should have been addressed.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I rise to speak briefly, on the back of the remarks made by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), about the future for telecommunications users in the event that the new clause and the amendments are agreed to, and particularly on the £25 billion going out of the telecommunications sector. That affects not only consumers, but the future development of the infrastructure and technology, as well as how quickly and universally the industry develops.

That brings me to an earlier point that the hon. Gentleman made about relying on competition to protect consumers of telecommunications. As a lay consumer of telecommunications, I do not find the market that clear in terms of providing effective protection and an easy choice of suppliers. Competition has not yet reached rural areas. The cellular communications network is quite well developed in urban areas, but areas such as mine have only the land line. The worry is that the free flow of unregulated competition in the early days of mobile communications may have undermined the infrastructure throughout the network. If the Bill is amended, how will the telecommunications consumer be protected in future?

Mrs. Liddell: It is interesting that the official Opposition are much more interested in procedural matters than in the Bill. I suspect that that is because the Bill concentrates on the protection of the consumer, and, in certain parts, on the most disadvantaged consumers.

We have debated on a number of occasions the Government's reasons for dropping telecommunications and water from the Bill. I shall not rehearse in their entirety today because that would take up the time of the House unnecessarily. On Second Reading and in Committee we discussed how the telecommunications industry is one of rapid change.

A few weeks ago, I was told that there are three speeds in modern life. There is political speed, which is slow; commercial speed, which we always used to think of as fast; and there is internet speed, where a year can be reduced to a few weeks. In this House we do not operate at internet speed, but the telecommunications industry does.

On Second Reading and in Committee we also debated the changes in the industry, and the fact that it would be necessary to revisit telecom regulations to ensure that changes in the industry, some of which we cannot foretell at the moment, are taken into account.

After the Bill's publication, the industry, no doubt having reflected on the issues raised in the debate, came to the Department to express its concern about the prospect of two separate sets of regulations over a short period, and one can understand that. There would have been one set of changes now and another set when further communications legislation was implemented. Removing telecommunications from the Bill was perceived as a common-sense move, especially as a communications White Paper was on the stocks. That White Paper involves not only the Department of Trade and Industry but the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Mr. Gibb: What is the Government's intention for the regulation of the telecommunications sector, which will be outlined in the White Paper to be published in the autumn? Will the Minister take the same approach to telecommunications as she took to electricity, or will she bring a lighter touch to bear on the regulation of a fast-moving sector?

Mrs. Liddell: I shall deal with that later, because it relates to points that the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made. I shall wait until I tackle those points rather than giving a disjointed response.

The water industry expressed anxieties about the possibility of further regulatory changes in the Water Bill. The Queen's Speech stated that a Water Bill would be introduced, and that its changes would be additional to those in the Utilities Bill. It is common sense to make sure that the industry does not have to change the regulatory structure twice.

Hon. Members have asked about our commitment to the future shape of telecommunications. The Government remain committed to the proposals in the Bill. In all the utility sectors, we want to secure a more transparent regulatory framework, an independent voice for consumers and a stronger focus on protecting their interests. Those principles will apply in the separate water and telecommunications measures. Some modification is possible. That is logical—I am sure that hon. Members would not wish us to ignore the views of consumers and the industry in the consultation process. However, we intend the principles of the Utilities Bill to apply to future legislation.

We intend to publish a communications White Paper later this year. It is too early to say when legislation will follow, not least because of the pressures on the House. It is not for me or anybody in the Chamber to dictate the contents of the forward programme for the next Session.

Mr. Gibb: Far be it for me to make a suggestion—but I shall do so anyway. Perhaps the Government could present a slightly less burdensome legislative programme. They might then discover that their Bills did not require 300 or 400 Government amendments.

Mrs. Liddell: When a Government take over after 18 years of incompetence, a heavy legislative programme is inevitable. We went to the country with specific commitments; the country responded, and we have to undo the mistakes of 18 years of Conservative rule. We therefore have a heavy legislative programme.

The prize for removing telecommunications and water from the Bill is that the industries will be subject to only one set of legislative changes. We all acknowledge that that is important. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) referred to the auction in mobile telecommunications. That is a matter for other Departments, and I would therefore prefer to leave it to them to respond. However, it emphasises the significance of the changes in mobile telephony. It is vital that we respond in legislation to the changes in the marketplace.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am a little confused, because I served on the Committee that considered the Bill, which provided for the Government to auction their radio spectrum. The Bill was a Department of Trade and Industry measure. Although the Treasury collects the money, surely we are considering a Department of Trade and Industry matter. We would therefore expect a senior DTI Minister to have an opinion about what should happen to the money.

4.45 pm

Mrs. Liddell: Given that those matters are being discussed, I am surprised that someone as experienced as the hon. Gentleman suggests that we might care to discuss them in detail this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Twickenham asked about a statutory consumer council for telecoms. The Government's view is that a statutory consumer council would be the most appropriate mechanism to meet the central aim of giving consumers an effective voice in the telecoms sector. The White Paper, which will be published in the autumn, will have a much wider ambit and will consider issues such as broadcasting. It will introduce different matters such as the interface with content regulation. Although the central aim remains the same, its manifestation may be different, as I am sure he recognises.

The hon. Gentleman said that the consumer groups feel aggrieved that the first remarks that they heard about telecoms and water being removed were made in the Chamber, but I am sure that, on reflection, he will appreciate that that is the appropriate way in which to deal with such matters. Given that the Bill had already been committed to a Standing Committee, it would not have been appropriate for any announcement to be made outside the House or for any consultation on those matters to take place. We acted as expeditiously as possible to inform the House after the decision had be taken.

The new clause is important. To an extent, it will tidy the Bill and enhance it because people, especially the public, will find it easier to use. At the beginning of the debate, it was suggested that more substantial changes might be proposed in another place. The Government do not intend to introduce further substantial changes. Amendments will be tabled in the other place, but they will all be based on issues that have been raised already.

Mr. Gibb: Will the Minister confirm that provision will be made for transfer schemes for public electricity suppliers?

Mrs. Liddell: Yes.

These measures represent the remaining stages of the Government's preparation of the Bill. My anxiety—I hope that it is shared by Members across the House—is to ensure that consumers gain the benefits of the Bill as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

SOURCES OF ELECTRICITY GENERATION

'. The Secretary of State shall, at least once per year, publish an analysis of the proportion of electricity produced from each type of generation over the previous 12 months, together with a statement by him of the Government's policy in relation to each of those types of generation.'.—*[Mr. Gibb.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Gibb: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 28, in clause 48, page 48, line 36, at end insert—

';—

(c) to facilitate the development of embedded generation;

(d) to support the achievement of the Government's national renewable energy targets by facilitating small-scale renewable generation through net metering.'.

Government amendment No. 3.

Mr. Gibb: The purpose of the new clause is to ensure that the Government have a coherent energy policy. It would require the Secretary of State to publish each year an analysis of the proportion of electricity generated from each source. About 30 per cent. of our electricity comes from gas; about 30 per cent. from nuclear power; and another 30 per cent. from coal. The remaining 10 per cent. is made up of electricity imported through the interconnector with France and renewables.

On Monday, it became obvious—if is was not already—that the Government do not have a clear energy policy or long-term strategy. If I am wrong, perhaps the Minister will set that strategy out, for the benefit of the House and the public. The Government's last known pronouncement on energy policy generally was their energy White Paper, published in October 1998, but, as everyone knows, it was simply an exercise in ex post facto rationalisation of a politically driven decision to impose a moratorium on building new gas-fired power stations.

[Mr. Gibb]

The justification for that decision was based on the bogus notion that companies would invest hundreds of millions of pounds in new gas-fired plant simply in response to temporarily high electricity prices, resulting from the fact that the electricity pool was not the right mechanism for the electricity market as it had developed since privatisation.

Given that the industry has known for many years that revised electricity trading arrangements were being developed, it was clear that prices would fall in the medium term. Investors will not invest on the basis of the price of a product in the short term, so the suggestion that there needed to be a moratorium to prevent investors from responding to this short-term price hike is absolute nonsense, and everyone in the industry knows that. No doubt that is why the Secretary of State took the earliest opportunity to lift the moratorium.

It would be interesting to hear from the Minister whether she has received legal advice about the legality of the moratorium—the stricter consents policy. I should be grateful for a confirmation of that.

The notion that all the problems highlighted in the White Paper will be solved when the new electricity trading arrangements come into effect in October is bogus. The White Paper implied that the Government want to see the new electricity trading arrangements working to ensure that they deliver lower prices before lifting the stricter consents policy. However, the Secretary of State has now announced that the moratorium will be lifted as soon as NETA become law this summer, if the Bill gets Royal Assent. This legislation will be in place by October.

Even the Labour-dominated Select Committee on Trade and Industry says:

> We do not believe that this moratorium on section 36 . . . consents . . . will assist the coal industry in the short run . . . we look to the Government to ensure that . . . the moratorium is lifted as soon as practicable.

The moratorium was introduced by the Secretary of State's predecessors to pacify Labour constituencies and Members with mining interests. It is a policy based on the internal politics of the Labour party rather than on what is in the best interests of Britain's energy needs. It is a piecemeal, ad hoc policy, rather than part of an overall energy strategy.

The new clause is designed to help the Government to focus on developing a proper long-term energy policy for Britain. We need a statement from the Minister about how the Government believe Britain's energy needs can be met, by what sources and how that ties in with the Government's Kyoto commitments and their domestic commitment of reducing carbon dioxide emissions to 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010.

That brings me to the great deceit in the Government's energy policy as enunciated in their White Paper, which states that the Government would expect to see a decline in CO_2 emissions from the power generation sector over the period covered by the Kyoto protocol, even on scenarios that retain the gas moratorium in 2008–12. Carbon dioxide levels have already fallen considerably below the 1990 levels.

The key issue about the 2008–12 Kyoto protocol target date is that from 2010 onwards—and even earlier—the United Kingdom will have significantly reduced its nuclear capacity as Britain continues to decommission Magnox nuclear power stations. Of course the Government will meet the 2008-12 target date for reducing CO_2 emissions to 12.5 per cent. below 1990 levels, but the key issue is what happens from 2012 onwards. The whole of the Government's strategy is aimed at that date. They have given little thought to what should happen beyond 2012.

On the basis of the Government's energy policy, it looks as though CO_2 emissions will begin to rise from 2012. They need to set out their policy on nuclear power as more and more of the older stations are decommissioned. Will they authorise the building of new nuclear plant? If not, how do they intend to ensure that CO_2 targets are met without the nuclear component? What is their policy on this matter? No doubt the right hon. Lady will say that she has received no requests from the nuclear industry to build new nuclear plant, because at the moment it does not regard doing so as economically worth while. The Kyoto commitments, however, impose on the market an artificial constraint to which Governments must respond. That is why there are provisions, in the Bill and elsewhere, that artificially nudge and encourage the free market to produce power by methods that it would not otherwise use, in order to help the Government and the country as a whole to meet the carbon dioxide emissions targets.

Nuclear energy plays a key role in fulfilling our carbon dioxide commitments, and in keeping our commitments at low levels. It is essential for the Government to respond to what happens when the nuclear power stations begin to be decommissioned. What is their long-term policy on nuclear energy?

What is the Government's policy on the granting of section 36 consents after October 2000? Will everyone who applies to the Department of Trade and Industry to build a gas-fired power station be given permission, now that the stricter consents policy is to be lifted in October, or will the Government apply different criteria—the same criteria that enabled them to support the building of the station at Baglan bay? Will those criteria now obtain across the country, or will the Government simply bring back the stricter consents policy in another guise? We need a statement from them.

In preparing an application to the DTI, industry incurs considerable costs. It must know what it is up against—what hurdles it needs to convince the Government about. Indeed, it needs to know that there is no point in applying for a section 36 consent in certain circumstances, and it needs to know precisely what those circumstances are.

What proportion of Britain's energy needs do the Government expect to be met by gas, coal and nuclear energy in 2020? What proportion do they expect to come from renewables? We need to know what they have in mind for each of those sources of electricity. If the target percentage for renewables is met, will that be sufficient for Britain to continue to show a decline in carbon dioxide emissions from electricity generation?

Those are the questions that the Government have so far refused to answer—or, more likely, are unable to answer. However, they need to be answered if industry is to be able to plan ahead. The Minister now has a chance to set out her energy policy: if she is on top of her brief, she should not find that very difficult. Will she give us, for example, her Department's estimate of the likely proportions of electricity generation by gas, coal and

nuclear energy in 2005, 2010 and 2020? What is her estimate of the reserves of discovered and undiscovered gas in the North sea?

Mrs. Liddell: How can we know about undiscovered reserves?

Mr. Gibb: That is a revelation. There are estimates of undiscovered gas reserves in the North sea. An appendix to the Minister's own energy White Paper gives figures for the likely number of years of undiscovered gas reserves in the North sea. Companies will not investigate and prove that gas reserves exist until they are needed; they start to "firm up" on where reserves are only once the figure falls to a certain number of years.

Those are important questions about a vital area of industrial and environmental policy. We await the Minister's response with great interest.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): New clause 2, amendment No. 28—which stands in my name and those of two of my hon. Friends—and Government amendment No. 3 are closely related.

Almost for the first time during the debates that we have had in and around the House, I find myself in substantial agreement with what was said by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). The United Kingdom lacks a national energy policy. That lack has not cropped up suddenly; it is long-standing. For a long time, decisions have been either deferred or made on a short-term basis, and the long-term investment strategy that is so clearly needed has not materialised—not least because industry has been given no clear signals or pointers towards the direction in which it should go.

5 pm

At the lowest level, new clause 2 introduces a sensible monitoring procedure, so that the Government's intentions can be clarified and the energy industry's performance in relation to the Government's intentions can be determined.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The hon. Gentleman will probably recall that, in Committee, I tabled an amendment on the diversity of supply. We have all been accused of having short memories. I wonder whether he remembers that Ministers resisted giving special treatment to fuels, particularly coal, yet the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on Monday and the Prime Minister today at Prime Minister's Question Time specifically said that they wanted to help coal to have such a position in the marketplace. Now that it is Wednesday, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we would like to hear from Ministers exactly what their policy is on fuel supplies, given that they have changed policy on that issue so many times in the past few weeks?

Mr. Stunell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment. I have received no advice on what the Government's energy policy for Wednesday is. As far as I know, it has not been issued, but, as he says, it would be interesting to hear that. The point is well illustrated by the Government's announcements this week. I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who was with us a few minutes ago, is not here at the moment because he clearly has a strong constituency interest in the future protection of the coal industry and I know that he welcomed the announcement.

On overall energy policy for the UK, may I pick up some of the issues that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton outlined about the share that different fuels will have in the electricity market? It is clear that there will be substantial changes not just in the next 10 years, but in the next 20 and 30 years. No one would have predicted 30 or even 10 years ago that gas would be the fuel of choice for generating electricity. It is difficult to be sure what the fuel of choice will be in 10 years' time. Energy policy needs to set some markers, which are hinted at in the Bill, particularly through its support in one form or another for the renewable energy generation industry, but the policy is not set out strongly enough.

I accept that one could not insert a new clause that included an energy policy, but the hon. Gentleman has usefully introduced a mechanism for that policy to become more transparent and self-evident. Should he press the matter to a vote, we will be happy to support him.

Amendment No. 28, in the name of the Liberal Democrats, amends clause 48, whereas Government amendment No. 3 amends clause 60. Amendment No. 28 places two additional duties on electricity distributors: first, to facilitate the provision of embedded generation within the transmission and distribution network; and, secondly, to facilitate small-scale renewable generation through the implementation of net metering.

Government amendment No. 3 is to reverse the amendment that was accepted in Committee: amendment No. 745. Were we to accept the Government amendment, we would delete Labour's manifesto commitment to renewables. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) may seek to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to comment on that.

The two amendments pull in diametrically opposite directions. I shall confine my remarks primarily to amendment No. 28, which relates to the additional duties that we seek to impose on distributors within the electricity market.

The Bill has some laudable aims. It certainly seeks to liberate the forces of competition and to bring benefits to consumers. Liberal Democrat Members have, when appropriate, supported those objectives. The Government claim that the Bill will produce lower prices, and there is some evidence to underpin that claim. It could also produce better service for consumers, as competition hots up and competitors are forced to provide better prices and service, which consumers will increasingly value.

Mr. Gibb: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about the evidence showing that the long-term price of electricity is decreasing—it does seem to have decreased because of the proposed new electricity trading arrangements—but I am surprised that he believes that the Bill will increase competition. The Bill specifically demotes the promotion of competition to a second-order objective, whereas it is currently a prime, first-order objective.

Mr. Stunell: I shall have something to say in a moment about the difficulties that new entrants may face under the new arrangements. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman has made a useful point.

[Mr. Stunell]

The market can be used to reduce prices and to improve service, and it is a sensible mechanism for achieving those objectives. However, there are problems—which the Bill recognises, at least partly—with unrestrained and unregulated competition. One of the problems is that social and environmental obligations are not easily fulfilled in a completely open-market, competitive economy.

There are some specific situations in which competition is a poor driver in achieving the Government's desired results, the first of which is when profit is increased by selling more product at a higher price. As competition can keep prices down, the argument against competition on the basis of higher price is defeated. However, competition will increase sales volumes. In a fiercely competitive environment, more profit is made by increased sales, not decreased sales.

The electricity market has a hierarchy comprising the levels of generation, transmission, distribution and supply. At every level, profit is increased by selling more product to the next level down in the hierarchy. Each level certainly gains value from selling more product to consumers. They all want more, not fewer sales. Their market-driven imperative is wholly hostile to the idea of decreasing the amount of energy that they produce and supply and to the idea of ensuring that their consumers use energy efficiently.

Amendment No. 28 recognises the fact that competition is entirely hostile to diversification in the sources of energy used to generate the electricity used by consumers. The market mechanism will not deliver diversification of supply. Therefore, if the intention of public policy is to achieve better conservation, greater efficiency in consumers' energy use and more renewable products in the market, the regulatory framework has explicitly to state those objectives. If the framework is not explicit, it will not achieve those objectives.

Interestingly, one of the companies that responded to the DTI's own consultation on licensing changes stated:

> The obligation to maintain an efficient distribution system potentially conflicts with the proposed obligation to facilitate competition in generation and supply . . . distribution networks have been laid down in a co-ordinated fashion over many years . . . each proposal for embedded generation must be considered individually and on an economic basis, rather than under any kind of blanket obligation.

In other words, those whom the market—and, currently, the Bill—requires to facilitate embedded generation are precisely those who have no interest in facilitating such generation and for whom the market is not a valid implement in achieving the objective.

Therefore, embedded generation—that is, generation that is at the lower end of the transmission and distribution hierarchy, at a lower voltage and nearer to the consumer—is in no way facilitated. Nor is net metering, whereby a small generator can supply electricity to and receive it from the distribution system, and pay a net price for it.

Amendment No.28 and the additional duties that it would impose on the distribution industry would lead to cost reductions rather than increases. However, it would not result in increased profits for the distributing companies, so they would have no incentive. The cost reductions would result from lower transmission losses on the electricity generated and, in the longer term, a reduced requirement for major investment in trunk electricity transmission. It would also result in fewer sales by those who are already in the market.

Our amendment could have been written by the DTI, because the DTI's consultation document on "Electricity Network Management Issues" states:

> In the medium and longer term

the aim is to

> encourage distribution companies to design networks so as to facilitate the accommodation of future embedded generation.

The amendment would reduce costs to the consumer in the short and the long term. It would also conform to the Department's intention in respect of the promotion of renewable energy. The losers would be the existing generation, transmission, distribution and supply players. That is why the provision needs to be within the regulatory system and not left to the market.

I have a number of questions which I hope that the Minister will address.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I share the hon. Gentleman's aspiration in respect of the promotion of embedded generation, but his amendment appears to be in advance of Government policy. In Committee, the Minister stated that

> a working group of representatives from the Government, Ofgem and the industry is examining the issues that surround embedded generation.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 14 March 2000; c. 486.]

Should we not wait for that report instead of trying to amend the Bill today?

Mr. Stunell: I have no problem with being in advance of the Government in respect of energy policy. In fact, it would be a major gymnastic feat to be behind them. Nor do I have any difficulty with proposing an amendment that conforms with the DTI's thinking, if not with its willingness to proceed, that goes some way towards providing a mechanism for the Department to develop its energy policy and, perhaps most importantly, that brings clearly into focus the fact that the market has value, but not in delivering those particular objectives.

I hope that the Minister accepts that embedded generators have serious problems in gaining fair access to the grid and to the market. I have heard a number of anecdotes from those who seek to be embedded generators about the difficulties that they face in dealing with the existing players in the market.

If the Government feel that the amendment is premature and that they do not wish to proceed with it, will they say specifically how, through legislation, they plan to open the door for embedded generation? If now is not the time, as the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) suggested, when should it happen? How can we ensure that the incentive for existing players in the electricity market to make more money by sending more electricity through their wires to suppliers is counteracted by a regulatory system that promotes conservation, efficiency and the introduction of renewable players at the most appropriate level?

5.15 pm

The Minister has an obligation to answer those questions, in terms of this debate, but I hope that in

default of doing so she will feel—as the Government felt in Committee with amendment No. 745—that she can accept that amendment No. 28 conforms with the Labour party's intention and the Government's declared policy. I shall not comment on Government amendment No. 3, because I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes will catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. From a personal point of view, I might say that the debate on that subject was one of the high spots of the Committee and it would be a great pity if it were lost at this time.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): My right hon. Friend the Minister will know that I raised several issues connected with embedded generation and CHP throughout the Committee stage. I was concerned that the Government did not have enough weapons in their armoury to deal with renewables and embedded generation. I am still worried that the Government's armoury is deficient and I have a few questions for my right hon. Friend, the answers to which will—I hope—allay my fears.

In some areas, embedded generation faces problems with access to the grid. I understand that the working party mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) will address those network management problems. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the working party will consider the issues of embedded generation and ensure that distributors will have the proper incentives to facilitate its development?

Net metering is well established in the United States of America and elsewhere. If the Government will not accept net metering, will they outline their reasons for that? As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said, the current market is about volume distribution, and several of the embedded generations are by small-scale operators. They face a barrier to entering the market because of the difference in volume. How will the regulators remove that barrier if net metering is not made compulsory?

The CHP and renewables industry has strongly welcomed the Government's approach, so when it makes criticisms they are usually valid, unlike some of the spurious criticism we heard earlier, especially from the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) who repudiates his own manifesto when he condemns the telecommunications auction.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. White: No. Will the Minister ensure that the recommendations by the working group will be made in time for amendments to be tabled in the other place?

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) made some sensible points, but he let himself down by attacking the Opposition. I realise that one has to show loyalty to one's own side and the Whips, but my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) speaks, as I do, in disappointment with the Bill. We expected rather more on renewables from the Government.

I should say that I am a vice-president of the Combined Heat and Power Association, which is not a paid task nor very onerous. I am also vice-chairman of the parliamentary renewable and sustainable energy group, and I see that the chairman is in his place. Perhaps he will also speak about how the Bill is a missed opportunity for renewables, because the Government could have done so much more. Are the Government really serious about meeting the Rio and Kyoto targets and about reducing carbon emissions and tackling global warming, which is—as I am sure we all agree—an enormous problem?

The Government are putting lots of money into coal, which will never be a clean fuel, but they could have done much more for renewables and I hope that when the Minister winds up this debate she will tackle that issue. Many people want to know what the Government will do to encourage renewables apart from talking about how much they would like to see 5 per cent. of energy coming from renewables by 2003 and 10 per cent. by a later date.

The particular question that many people have raised with me is that of net metering and it beggars belief that the Government have not been willing to take that issue on in this major Bill. Net metering should surely have been included. We heard from the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East that net metering is much in demand in the US. Why cannot we start introducing it in this country? It might bring down the price of photovoltaics and make them more attractive for installation on roofs that cover a small area.

What exactly is the Government's problem with net metering? I see no problem at all with it.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Is it not amazing that the Government constantly want to bring in new legislation that has no purpose? The Bill is a case in point. A small group of people says that the current system is not working properly. The Government have set their face against all the sensible amendments tabled in favour of net metering.

Mr. Robathan: I agree. I had hoped that I might agree with the Government about renewable energy, but I am disappointed because they have not done more. The previous Conservative Government introduced the non-fossil fuel obligation, but this Government could do more to support renewable energy. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry talked a couple of days ago about combined power and heat. The fact that he got the phrase wrong was a little sad.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend was not a member of the Standing Committee considering the Bill, so he may not have known that the Opposition tabled an amendment to what is now clause 60, which deals with renewables. We wanted to add combined heat and power to the definition of renewable sources, as we believed that it made sense to add that to the percentage of renewables that the Government are requiring suppliers to purchase. That would have been a real boost to the combined heat and power industry. My hon. Friend will be disappointed to know that the Government resisted that amendment.

Mr. Robathan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that information. I wanted to be a member of the Committee but, given that it sat 22 times, I might have regretted it.

[Mr. Robathan]

In this world of joined-up government, the Government have excluded combined heat and power from the climate change levy. Why do they not believe that CHP is a remarkably good way of generating energy more efficiently?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman is known for his interest in renewables and in combined heat and power. Will he explain how those elements of CHP that derive from fossil fuels are renewable?

Mr. Robathan: That is a good point, but it rests on semantics. Combined heat and power is a much more efficient way of generating energy—

Mrs. Liddell: It uses coal too.

Mr. Robathan: I understand how the power of CHP is generated, but it contributes to the carbon emission targets from power generation set at Rio and Kyoto. That is why CHP seems a sensible way forward. The Minister shakes her head, but it would be helpful if she could explain by what other means the Government's targets for combined heat and power generation will be met.

We should encourage the development of renewable energies now. An enormous industrial potential exists that we might be able to meet. For instance, a representative of a firm called Solar Century has been in touch with me on several occasions with some really good ideas on photovoltaics. I am not plugging that company, but some encouragement in that sector might allow Britain to have its own industry. We used to be rather good at producing wind generators, but it has all gone to the continent because the industry was not given sufficient support in this country—apart from on the Floor of the House of Commons. The story is the same with fuel cells.

The Minister said that CHP was not renewable. Of course it is not necessarily generated by renewables, but micro-CHP could be of enormous benefit in this country, where it could be suitable for 4 to 6 million homes. However, the Bill does not deal with it, and so does not encourage it. We should encourage such methods of electricity generation, as they would benefit the environment. That is what I would think of as joined-up government.

I understand that the net metering debate was lost in Committee, and I shall not dwell on it. However, it would surely be sensible if I were to install in my house what amounted to a small power station, for me to be able to sell electricity for the same sum for which I bought it from the grid. That would not cost the Government, or anyone else, anything, but would reduce the amount of energy that we need to generate from fossil fuels. Why will the Government not open their ears? I see Labour Members nodding at that, but I shall not name them. What we propose is a sensible method to encourage renewable energy and small-scale schemes in a way that the Bill does not.

The Bill is a missed opportunity on renewables. It has been a bit of a mess all round. It once covered four utilities; it now covers only two. I appeal to the Government to consider, even at the 11th hour and in the other place, the inclusion of some encouragement towards renewable energy, which might result in better take-up of renewable energy schemes and help the Government to meet their stated targets.

Sir Robert Smith: I have a constituency interest in the amendments, and I am also vice-chairman of the all-party offshore oil and gas industry group, which is committed to renewables and their potential to provide a future for the industry. Constituents have told me that if we encourage renewables, the industry has the skills to develop offshore wind technology to which our country is well suited. The industry has the infrastructure and experience that come from working offshore, and, being out of sight, it gets over many environmental and local concerns about the positioning of wind farms. It is also easier to farm the wind offshore, because air currents are more stable and generation is more reliable and less directionally dependent.

The construction industry and others in the doldrums as a result of the downturn in the oil industry could also face a better future. The oil industry is used to tying platforms and cables back to the shore and would be well placed to develop offshore wind technology. It would be an added benefit for the United Kingdom if we led the way in generation, because we could develop it as an export industry. As with the oil industry, if we have a home base, an export market can be exploited.

Given the structure of our energy markets, it would be sad if that never happened. There are entry costs because of the barriers to entering the technology, but when it is up and running, the costs of production will start to fall. My analysis of where profits come from may differ slightly from that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), because profits can be made even if the price stays the same and supply does not increase, but production costs are reduced.

Entering the market for offshore wind generation could be both attractive and commercially viable, but the Government need an incentive, which is why they should resist their own amendment No. 3. They should keep pressure on themselves to ensure that the environment encourages development so that we can cross the entry barriers and see generation as a growing industry that can build on its experience in the North sea.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Three quite different provisions are before us, although it is clearly for the convenience of the House that they can be discussed together. I shall make a short speech on each of them because the critical issues that we wish to revisit are important.

New clause 2, tabled by my hon. Friends and me, is intended to tease out where the Government are going on diversity of supply and what their energy policy is. The Government constantly say that they have an energy policy and that they intend to do all sorts of things in line both with Kyoto and with planning the economy as Labour Governments love to do.

I have been genuinely confused during the period of our discussions in Committee about the announcement made on Monday, and backed up by the Prime Minister, about the coal industry.

5.30 pm

Labour Members were surprised that a free-marketeer, right-wing Conservative such as myself should table

amendments that would ensure that industries such as coal could be protected under the Bill. We now find that an authority will decide how electricity is generated. If the Government are sincere about the Utilities Bill and really want to take decisions as to how electricity should be produced for the good of the consumer, the climate and so on—although they are concentrating only on gas and electricity—and if they want to intervene in markets to decide that a particular fuel or technology should be used in order to reduce carbon dioxide, then the means to manipulate the market should be included in the measure.

In Committee, I was pleased that the Government rejected that approach. The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, who represents a south Wales constituency, referred to the harmful effects of coal. He suggested that to continue to try to support the coal industry was a terribly old Labour policy, because of the harm caused to the environment and to people's health by burning coal. That was surprising. By "Yes, Minister" criteria, it was a brave statement. He was fortunate that the general press did not report the Committee proceedings on that occasion, although there were some good exchanges in which we were able to tease out the issues.

However, lo and behold, a leak was made in the usual way—on Radio 4, where we hear parliamentary announcements—that the Government would make a statement to the House that up to £100 million would be allocated, by some mechanism outside the Bill, to support coal mining and the continued use of coal. The price of coal would be kept down, so that it could be used for generating.

We need to know whether the Government really want to establish such mechanisms. The Government should not be leaking announcements about their support for the coal industry with an electoral bribe of £100 million, just because the industry is in Labour areas and they know that they will lose hundreds of seats in the local elections. We should be determining what the Government's policy is, based on the amendments before the House and those tabled in Committee.

Most of us would accept that, as the Labour Government have constituency interests in the coal-mining industry and as they have criticised previous Governments for allowing that industry to decline—as did many Back-Bench Conservative Members—they would include in the Bill provisions to protect the interests of their constituents in mining areas. However, those provisions are not in the Bill.

Although the Government will not tell us what they want, our new clause would offer a simple mechanism whereby, at least every year, a report would be produced of what they had done, with details of their possible interventions in the market.

If I had decided to sell gas to an electricity generator and was undermined by the Government's offering the generator £100 million to use coal, under an improved pricing structure, I should be most annoyed. Having made that announcement, the Government should put their money where their mouth is—the policies should be up front. If they believe they have an energy policy, they should accept the new clause; they should produce yearly reports on what has happened in the past and on their proposals for the future. When we made these points in Committee, Ministers said, "No, that would mean that we were picking winners," in that they would be deciding which fuels should be available, and that diversity of supply and having many different suppliers would no longer be part of the Government's policy. However, they have contradicted themselves.

The Government suggest that they had a change of heart in respect of the moratorium on gas-fired power stations. I understand that they have been told by lawyers that they are subject to judicial review, and that if they had not changed their mind, they would be before the courts. They may even now find themselves before the courts, and lose a lot of money.

The Bill could have provided mechanisms to allow the Government to intervene. I am not selling that point and I do not want them to intervene. Instead, I am saying that if they take certain actions they should do so by using legislation and be up front.

Sir Robert Smith: One would hope that the Government had learned the lesson and understood that their policy was leading to the importing of cheap coal at the expense of British coal.

Mr. Bruce: That may be the situation.

I do not want to go too wide of the new clause and the amendments, but the Government might report to the House under the clause the action that had been taken to ensure that the unfair subsidy of coal in Germany and France was being acted upon. I had a short meeting with a former Conservative Minister who had been doing the sort of jobs that are now being undertaken by the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe and the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs. He told me that towards the end of the Conservative Administration he had instituted proceedings to ask the Commission to inquire into the misuse of the subsidies, which were being used to restructure the German and French industries. They allowed those countries to lay off miners, for example. As I understand it, the inquiry has not taken place. We need to know regularly from the Government precisely what they are doing.

The Government have come forward with a non-sensical climate change levy. It does not address the issues of reducing the amount of CO_2. It seems that it is intended to make manufacturing expensive in this country, and perhaps we shall not burn so much fuel overall, or we might not use so much nuclear electricity, for example. However, that does not reduce the CO_2 load in the atmosphere throughout the world. It merely sends jobs elsewhere.

The clause would provide an auditing mechanism to ascertain how the climate change levy was working. I contend that it will not work, but a report would make the reason clear. That would have been an excellent way of bringing things forward.

Amendment No. 28 was tabled by the Liberal Democrats. I found myself in the strange situation of being a friend of the Friends of the Earth. I have always made it clear to that organisation that I am not its friend. However, I continue to receive very pleasant faxes from it. I am telephoned by a charming young lady. Perhaps it is because she is so charming that I tell her that I will do my little best to help the Liberal Democrats in what they are trying to do.

[Mr. Bruce]

An increasing number of Conservatives are saying that there are market mechanisms and sensible ways of going forward. I am attracted by the amendment because, in effect, it is saying to every individual, "You can be your own generator." We have to pay a generator if he sends us electricity, and the amendment is saying that there should be a mechanism to allow electricity to be sent the other way. I am not saying that whenever amps are sent in the other direction the same prices should prevail, and the clause does not specifically ask for that. I am happy to take advice, but I believe that it would ensure that a mechanism is put in place that enables amps to be sent in the opposite direction.

Mr. Stunell: The hon. Gentleman's interpretation of our amendment is entirely correct. There is no direct requirement on the pricing or tariff structure in such a net metering arrangement.

Mr. Bruce: I am most grateful for that explanation; it is appropriate to make that point clear.

The number of Conservative Members on the Committee was limited. It is interesting that the Minister suggested that there were not many Conservatives on the Committee, and she is absolutely right. There were only five Conservative members on the Committee and, for the majority of the time, all five were present. Usually, 50 per cent. of the Liberal Democrats turned up, but occasionally none of them did. *[Interruption.]* The sedentary intervention is surprising, because—believe it or not—the same Ministers and their silent Back Benchers regularly seemed to think that I spoke too much about these issues and that I spent too long moving amendments that they did not want to discuss. I have some difficulty with that suggestion.

Mrs. Liddell: Perhaps, the hon. Gentleman can explain to the House where the invisible men on the Committee were on 21 and 28 March? The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) was left completely isolated.

Mr. Bruce: The Minister has the advantage of having the record with her. I just wonder whether—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I just wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will return to discussion of the amendments.

Mr. Bruce: I always follow to the letter your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I should not have been drawn by the Minister's intervention.

When we discussed net metering in Committee, there was a great flurry among the Labour ranks. The Trappist tendency in the Labour party started to make some comments. We thought that some of the soft words that we heard from Ministers were a sign that they would go away—

Mrs. Liddell: I never say soft words.

Mr. Bruce: The Minister says that she never gives us any soft words, but she did on occasions act out of character and say soft words to the Committee. The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs says nothing but soft words. I do not wish to destroy his career, because I look on him as a friend. He was always in good mood in Committee and always good value.

Members are trying to distract me, but I return to the point that Labour Members suddenly became impassioned when the term "net metering" appeared on the amendment paper. In fact, some amendments were tabled in their names. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) is not here now. He made a short speech, and perhaps he had a deal with the Whip so that he could speak for a minute or two as long as he absented himself—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is wool gathering again. Let us get back to the substance of the amendment.

Mr. Bruce: I am sure that wool and insulation are not appropriate subjects for debate.

On net metering, Ministers first appeared to misunderstand what we were trying to do. I remember them saying that net metering would create a cross- subsidy from electricity consumers in general to electricity consumers with some generational capacity for their own purposes. That was a complete misunderstanding of what we intended. I do not know whether it was deliberate, or whether they had not done their homework. Earlier, we heard that they tended to speak from prepared briefs, so they may not have been listening to the arguments.

Ministers then said that, on reflection, their Green Papers and discussion documents contained exactly the same type of suggestions as we had made. It is amazing how the Labour party was converted by the last general election. It had all sorts of interesting ideas that it said that it would introduce, but it came to government and took three years to introduce the Bill. Its scope was then halved and all the so-called good ideas that it said that the nasty Tories would never think about were wiped off the map. That is a waste of a Government with enthusiasm whom Members on both sides of the House were willing to support in trying out new ideas. We were even willing to consider making Friends of the Earth happy, which is seldom possible because the organisation likes to campaign only in a negative way. For once, it might have thought that we had a good idea.

5.45 pm

I do not want to steal the thunder of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, who has yet to speak to the new clause, but I want to comment on Government amendment No. 3. That seeks to remove from the Bill the target, which has been Government policy since the previous Administration adopted it, of meeting 5 per cent. of our electricity requirements from renewables by 2003 and 10 per cent. by 2010. Friends of the Earth has made the interesting point that a future European Union directive will impose targets that will be legally binding on the Government.

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman might recall, if he was back from Puerto Rico at the time, that we had a discussion about the failure of the European Union to introduce a renewables directive. An Energy Council will

be held within the next few weeks, but we still have no directive. If anyone has managed to magic such a directive into existence for Friends of the Earth, I must say that it is a dubious and fraudulent document.

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful for that advice, and I am sure that Friends of the Earth will listen to it carefully. Perhaps we will not have such a European directive, but the Minister who responds might want to deal with the point made by Friends of the Earth.

When one is in opposition, one tables amendments, forcing the Government to do one thing or another, and there is a standard reply from Ministers. In this case, Ministers might say that if the Government amendment were not made, it would mean that in 2003 a policeman could say to the Secretary of State, "I have noticed that you have not generated enough electricity from renewables. You are under arrest and will be prosecuted." There is no mechanism for prosecuting the Government because they have not fulfilled a target in a Bill but, if that were possible, it would explain why the Government are so determined to make amendment No. 3.

If an EU directive is agreed, how will it be enforced? Will the Government of the day simply implement it because they have agreed to its terms, or will it be legally enforceable?

Mrs. Liddell: Why is the hon. Gentleman talking about hypothetical issues? The directive does not exist.

Mr. Bruce: I am sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you could tell the Minister, even if I could not, that these are the issues on the amendment paper. Amendment No. 3 would remove the 5 and 10 per cent. targets.

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman seems completely to have missed the point. Perhaps that is the effect of his having been away from the Committee for a while. One of our criticisms of the European Union is that it has not introduced a renewables directive. If renewables are to have a proper impact on international climate change, it is important that we have international agreement. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would care to reflect on that fact.

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady because she replied as I wanted her to reply. If we have a directive that is, supposedly, enforceable on the Government, which would be the effect of the new clause, how will we ensure that other nations are keeping to its terms? Clearly, we want to reduce CO_2 throughout the world and not just in our skies, which of course move across to other countries, and that is the important issue.

Liberal Democrats are usually embarrassed to blow their own trumpet, so I shall have to do it for them. I remember the look of surprise on the face of the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) when the Labour Front Benchers in Committee were not up to shouting "No" to his amendment. I was surprised by his surprise, because it had been clear throughout our proceedings that the entire Bill was a shambles. Earlier today, I raised a point of order relating to the fact that my amendment relating to the consolidation of the Bill had, unnoticed, been recorded in *Hansard* as having been agreed; the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, who must read *Hansard* every night, and thousands of Department of Trade and Industry staff had not noticed the mistake. Even in Committee, after the hon. Member for Lewes had got the amendment made that we are now being asked to remove, we had to nudge the Government before they realised that they had made a mistake. It is rare that I congratulate the Liberal Democrats, but I congratulate them on showing what a total shambles the Labour Government really are.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I apologise to the House and to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) for having been slightly late in arriving for the debate. I plead paternity leave in my defence, and add that my presence here today is not entirely understood or even supported at home.

Mr. Gibb: Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), I offer the Liberal Democrats my congratulations. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on the birth of his daughter. May I suggest a name for her: RETA—as in the revised electricity trading arrangements?

Mr. Baker: That is an ingenious suggestion, but one that I shall probably ignore when the time—fast approaching—comes to sort out a name.

I could not miss the opportunity to return for the debate on Government amendment No. 3. I am at a loss to know what to make of it. The Government's policy is set out in "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21st Century: Conclusions in response to the public consultation", which states:

> 5 per cent. of UK electricity requirements should be met from renewables by the end of the year 2003 and 10 per cent. by 2010.

That relates closely to the amendment that was tabled in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) and me. We were trying to be helpful to the Government by inserting in the Bill a Labour party policy that had obviously been omitted by mistake during the process of getting the Bill up and running.

I thought that our help had been acknowledged because, when it came to the vote in Committee, the Government Whip, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Mr. Pope), was so keen to support the amendment that he added his voice to mine. Such was the force of the argument and the fact that the amendment indisputably represented Labour party policy, that not a murmur of opposition was heard—the amendment was passed nem con. Both Ministers now present acceded to the amendment, and I was pleased to see that they accepted the policy of their own party.

Therefore, I am at a loss to know why the Government are attempting to reverse my amendment—I can think of no explanation other than that it must be a mistake. It is certainly a slap in the face for the Labour Whip—a free-thinking, sensible person and a paid-up member of the human race who is much too good for the Whips Office—and for the Ministers who were present in Committee and implicitly acknowledged that my arguments had force and that my amendment should be accepted. It is extremely odd that it required a Liberal Democrat to introduce a Labour party policy whose removal requires Labour party action now.

I wonder whether anything occurred between Committee and Report to justify such action. Nothing has changed, so the only explanation that I can offer is that

[Mr. Baker]

Ministers have been leaned on by forces higher up in the Government than they are. I cannot believe that the Labour Whip in Committee made a mistake and all the Labour members of the Committee were asleep when my amendment was voted on.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Does the hon. Gentleman remember that he congratulated Government Front Benchers on their actions in Committee and that they did nothing to disavow his congratulations—in fact, they appeared pleased?

Mr. Baker: I remember that well. Ministers and Government Back Benchers present on that occasion appeared happy with the amendment when it was made, so I cannot understand why it is now to be reversed.

If the Government intend to pursue that action, it calls into question their commitment to renewable energy. This week, £100 million was plucked out of nowhere for the coal industry, despite the fact that, as the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) says, that is hardly picking a winner. A parliamentary answer I received on 24 March tells me that £9.6 million was spent by the Government on research, development, dissemination and demonstration for the renewable energy programme in 1998–99, which is the most recent year for which figures are available. That is less than the sums spent by the Conservative Government, who regularly spent between £20 million and £25 million each year. The Labour Government have drastically cut the amount of money put into renewable energy. In fact, spending for 1998–99 was the lowest in the 10-year period covered by my question, and it was the first time that spending dropped below £10 million a year. A question mark hangs over the Government's commitment to renewable energy.

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Gentleman might be surprised to learn the contents of a message that I have just received about the European Commission's renewables directive. Our friends in Friends of the Earth tell me that it was released on 10 April and widely reported. Therefore, there must be an EU directive. Does the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe recognise that Friends of the Earth was right and the Government were wrong?

Mr. Baker: I draw two conclusions from that intervention. First, that the hon. Gentleman is closer to Friends of the Earth than he sometimes appears to be, which is a good thing, and secondly, that the Minister appears to have been briefed badly, which has not been unusual during proceedings on the Bill.

Let me return to the question of the right hon. Lady's commitment to renewable energy. In Committee, she told me that if I read "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21st Century: Conclusions in response to the public consultation", I would see

> the extent to which we are moving towards fulfilling our manifesto commitments, and our commitment to ensuring a proper foundation and strong future for the renewable energy industry.

Who can complain about that? Later, she told me:

> The Government have every intention of using the new powers to meet the declared target of 10 per cent. of renewables by 2010—

but if the Government have every intention of following their own policy and doing that, what can be the objection to writing that into the Bill? That is all that we did in Committee. Is it not the truth that the Government are not really committed to that target? I ask that because the right hon. Lady added the proviso,

> provided that the cost to consumers—

no doubt, widely drawn—

> "is acceptable."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 30 March 2000; c. 580.]

I suggest that the Government are only superficially committed to renewables. They are committed to sending the right message to environmental groups, to saying the right things, and to writing nice words that can be trailed out when they meet representatives of Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace, but they are not committed to delivering on the policy—quite the reverse. If they were committed to that, they would be happy for it to be written into the Bill, but they are not. The Government want to tell the green groups that they are committed to wonderful renewable energy, but they also want to be able to tell industry not to worry because there is no real target, and to give some sort of reason for reducing their commitment even further. That is a slightly dishonest position for the Government to have adopted.

The other relevant point about renewables is that, in Committee, the Government refused to accept the EU definition of renewable energy as excluding the incineration of waste. In response to a question from me, the Minister declared that a substantial amount of the renewable energy generation target—loosely defined—would be met from incineration capacity. That is the basis not for an argument for or against incineration, but for the argument that waste which is incinerated is not a renewable energy source. That is clear.

It was all very well for the Minister to criticise the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), saying that combined heat and power was not renewable energy, but the Government are perfectly happy to describe incineration capacity and waste burned in that way as renewable energy, which it patently is not—not least because it encourages the production of waste in the first place, which is not environmental, and because it leaves a huge toxic deposit to be disposed of. Bottom ash and fly ash are highly toxic. How can something be declared renewable when it produces such toxic waste? The Minister is all at sixes and sevens on the issue.

The reality is that the Government got it wrong and there was a mix-up in Committee. Such things happen, but the measure introduced by my amendment was directly in line with Labour party policy and with the Government's stated intentions in their own documents. We must now ask why they are removing it. I have had no proper explanation for that. Unless they can give one today, the only conclusion that any fair-minded Member can reach is that they are not really committed to that renewable target.

6 pm

Mrs. Liddell: I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on the birth of his daughter. May I suggest the name Anita, after NETA—new electricity trading arrangements? Having gone through the experience that the hon. Gentleman and his wife are now going through, and knowing that they will probably have many sleepless nights, I commend to the hon. Gentleman

the speeches of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce). I am sure that they will be a superb antidote to insomnia.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I thought that the right hon. Lady was about to say that I sounded so sweet that the child would not cry when listening to one of my speeches.

Mrs. Liddell: Perhaps it is the obsession with marble pillars. That is an in-joke for Committee members.

It is not often that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) gets something right, and he has got it wrong again. New clause 2 concerns the publication of information. My Department already has annual and monthly energy publications that contain the information that the new clause seeks to have published, and a great deal more beside. I commend those publications to the House. The Government will continue to communicate their energy policy through clear and timely announcements.

Is it not a measure of the bitterness among Opposition Members about the coal industry that we heard such bile about the Secretary of State's statement on Monday? It is the Government's duty, and my specific duty as the Minister with responsibility for energy, to ensure security and diversity of supply. That was something to which the previous Government paid little attention in their vendetta against the coal industry. The move that my right hon. Friend made on Monday to ensure that the management of change in the coal industry—which has gone to great lengths to improve its effectiveness and efficiency—will allow a future for an industry that the Opposition sought to destroy.

Mr. Baker: In the interests of diversity of supply, will the right hon. Lady explain why this week the Government announced £100 million for the coal industry, but, on the most recent figures, have spent less than £10 million on renewable energy research?

Mrs. Liddell: I am surprised that Liberal Democrats should attack the coal industry, particularly as the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) represents a constituency that will directly benefit from the steps taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I am sure that Liberal Democrats' remarks will be much reported in the communities that have suffered as a consequence of the previous Government's policy on the coal industry.

There is no reason to accede to new clause 2. The publications of the Department for Trade and Industry contain detailed and comprehensive data and statistics which underpin the analysis of UK energy within government and beyond. The sixth annual edition of the DTI's energy report was published in December, and I commend it to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton—*[Interruption.]* He says that he has it on his desk. It would be quite useful to open it. I have many things on my desk that would occasionally come in handy if they were opened. I also have quite a few things under my desk, which I guarantee will never be opened. Copies of that publication are in the Libraries of both Houses. That gives not just a national view of energy issues, but an international view, which is particularly important in a modern and complex world.

Chapter 3 of that report addresses energy policy and answers all the questions that the hon. Gentleman put; chapter 8 contains full facts and figures about electricity generation; and I suspect that the rest contains any additional information that any hon. Member might reasonably want to know about energy policy. It is available on the DTI website, or from the Stationery Office and reputable bookshops for £39.50.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for referring me to those learned texts, but what is the Government's nuclear policy given that the Magnox power stations are already being decommissioned?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman may or may not—one can never be certain—be aware of the announcement that was made by British Nuclear Fuels plc yesterday in relation to the closing date for the Magnox stations. That will be a determining factor in the future proportion of electricity generation from nuclear energy. I cannot second guess the outcome, but the Government's policy on new nuclear build is that it is for the market to come forward with its proposals. Companies may come forward with proposals for nuclear generation and they will be looked at in the usual way. At the moment, there is no suggestion that any companies are coming forward with new nuclear build, here or internationally.

Mr. Stunell: Does the Minister accept that, if the market comes forward with a solution that adds to the carbon dioxide burden on the atmosphere, the Government have a problem?

Mrs. Liddell: The Government do not have a problem, because it is for the Government to decide whether any application should go ahead. In taking a decision about the future of a specific energy proposal, we have to take into account all sorts of factors, not least our commitment to the Kyoto targets. That explanation also serves in relation to gas-fired power stations. Each proposal will be looked at on its merits. The hon. Member for Lewes referred to the Baglan bay proposal. That involves a high-tech specification, and that is one reason why the Government acceded to it. Hon. Members on both sides of the House argue effectively for gas-fired power stations. Regardless of from where the case comes, it will be looked at by the Government in some detail.

New clause 2 is unnecessary. Quite apart from the energy document to which I referred, which was published in December, there is also the *Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics*. That is not a new publication; it has been published by the Government every year for the past 50 years and it includes further information on electricity generation. All of that is supplemented by a monthly publication "Energy Trends", which is available on subscription from my Department. Any hon. Member who wished to receive it could contact the Department; perhaps we could even waive the cost.

Several points have been made about amendment No. 28, which would establish duties in relation to embedded generation and net metering. Those points have been debated in depth in Committee. Again, I must ask the House not to accept the amendment. Much embedded generation is from renewables; the Bill already acknowledges the importance of renewables. However,

[Mrs. Liddell]

the measure separates supply and distribution. It places a duty on distributors to facilitate competition in generation and to develop and maintain an efficient, co-ordinated and economical system of distribution. It places a duty on the authority to promote consumer interests by encouraging effective competition.

I expect the duty to be effected through regulatory action, which will give all forms of generation, including embedded generation, a fair crack of the whip. Embedded generation should not be disadvantaged. If that means that the distributors have to provide readier access to their systems—that is the point of difficulty—and their databases, I expect regulation to ensure that that happens. However, it would not be right for consumer or environmental protection to give special advantages to embedded generation.

We have had several discussions about net metering. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) takes a considerable interest in that, and I believe that he genuinely misunderstands the position. The Bill is neutral on net metering, which is one method of supporting embedded generation. I do not believe that it is necessarily the right method because it implies a cross-subsidy. It would require suppliers to pay more for electricity supplied through embedded generation than it was worth to them. It would relieve embedded generators of the cost of maintaining the transmission and distribution networks. Prices for other customers would have to reflect that.

Our policy is—to use a horrible phrase—to try to provide a level playing field, not to favour one system of generation over another. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton challenged us about that when we considered gas-fired generation.

Mr. Robathan: I did not serve on the Committee that considered the Bill and held lengthy discussions on the subject. However, the Secretary of State's announcement of £100 million for the coal industry does not constitute providing a level playing field. If we genuinely want to encourage renewables, they need a boost. I am all for level playing fields in commerce, but sometimes a sector needs particular encouragement. For good reasons, renewables need a boost, and I am genuinely disappointed that the Government are not using the Bill to do that.

Mrs. Liddell: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is disappointed. He misunderstands the Bill—I hope not deliberately. Through the 10 per cent. obligation, the Bill will take renewables from the margins and make them mainstream. However, I shall consider that when we discuss the next amendment.

Our targets for renewables are clear, and clauses 60 to 65 cater for them well. The Government and the regulator acknowledge that further regulatory action may be required to ensure that embedded generation can thrive. That is why the working group to which my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) referred, which comprises representatives of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, the Government and the industry, is examining all the issues that surround embedded generation. It will report before the end of the year, and the Government will address any specific problems that it identifies.

The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton wanted the working group to report before the other place considered the Bill. That shows that the Conservative party is not committed to achieving a way forward for embedded generation. It is important to get things right. The Bill allows the regulator to take action when necessary to assist embedded generation.

6.15 pm

Through the working group and other initiatives, the Department is taking steps to remove some confusion about the connection of small-scale photovoltaic generators to the electricity distribution system. That has resulted in a draft engineering recommendation—G77—which provides technical guidelines to the industry on the connection of small PV systems. On 2 May, I shall address the photovoltaics conference in Glasgow, where I shall make that point. There are difficulties with photovoltaics; they are expensive. If we followed the route that some pressure groups propose, they would become so expensive that their price would run the risk of turning the public against renewables. We must take the public with us on renewables.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine mentioned offshore wind. One of the problems of onshore wind is the difficulty of convincing people to have generators in their gardens. I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that offshore wind offers a new opportunity to the offshore industry. However, I am intrigued by his view that the oil industry is in the doldrums. I fail to understand how that can be true when oil costs $23 a barrel. I support greater activity from the oil and gas industries, not least because of the increase in the oil price, but also because of the Secretary of State's proposal to lift the restricted consents policy.

Sir Robert Smith: I am disappointed that a Minister who should know more about the industry believes that a decision on Monday will affect all investment decisions in the industry by Wednesday. The industry requires long-term confidence in price and in the tax regime. The Chancellor created instability in the tax regime. Fortunately, the Government have put that behind them. The Minister could therefore have been more understanding about the difficulties in the industry and taken the constructive approach that the amendments propose rather than leading us off at a tangent.

Mrs. Liddell: Earlier, the hon. Gentleman asked about offshore wind. If he did not want an answer, he could have saved the time of the House.

As chairman of Pilot, the second generation of the oil and gas industry task force, I can state that we have been consulting the industry for some time about future developments in the North sea, especially in relation to gas. The industry has been vociferous in asking for the lifting of the restricted gas consents policy. We hope that that will lead to developments. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine should be aware of the Government's interest in progress in the Clair field, which could help onshore fabrication.

The hon. Member for Lewes has had his fun at the expense of Government amendment No. 3. I do not blame him; I would have probably done the same in his position. Given that the hon. Member for Epping Forest

(Mrs. Laing) has excellent taste in Charles Rennie Mackintosh jewellery, she will recognise the sentiment that there is hope in honest error; there is none in the icy perfection of the mere stylist. Honest error can occur.

I concede that perhaps honest error led the hon. Member for Lewes to table amendments Nos. 235 and 236 and to omit to turn up in Committee to move them. Everybody makes mistakes. The hon. Gentleman made some valid points in Committee, and I replied to them—but amendment No. 28 was ill thought out and would not achieve his intention.

The Bill gives the Secretary of State the power to place obligations on electricity suppliers. It sets the framework for those obligations. Indeed, it takes renewables from the margins to the mainstream. However, I continue to believe that it should not prescribe the obligations. In asking the House to accept our amendment, I make one thing perfectly clear for the sake of the record and for those listening to the debate: there is no question of the Government going back on our commitment to produce 5 per cent. of electricity from renewable sources by 2005 and 10 per cent. by 2010, but all of us who are interested in promoting generation from renewables must take the cost to consumers into account. The only issue before us is whether it is right to include those figures in the Bill.

Mr. Gibb: The right hon. Lady is renewing her commitment to achieving 5 per cent. by 2005. Does she mean by 2003?

Mrs. Liddell: No, I said 5 per cent. by 2005 and 10 per cent. by 2010.

We have made it plain that we intend to consult further on how those powers will be exercised. They represent a big move forward and it is important that we get it right. That requires consultation.

Mr. Baker: I am trying to pin down the Government's position. If they remain committed to those targets, although one already seems to have slipped from 2003—*[Interruption.]* The Government's paper refers to 2003, but the target is now 2005. If they remain committed to those targets, why are they not prepared to put them in the Bill?

Mrs. Liddell: I hate to repeat myself, but it is not appropriate to include the targets because we need to consult. We have to ensure that we take the industry and consumers with us, and the provision that the hon. Gentleman sought to insert in Committee would have pre-empted that consultation. I do not know Liberal Democrat policy on listening to people, but Labour Members believe in listening. We need to consult both on the profile of the obligation that we will impose so as to reach our buy-out mechanism target, and on the cost to consumers of achieving that obligation. The buy-out mechanism will considerably assist the renewables industry, and I contend that not allowing consultation on it would be contrary to the hon. Gentleman's aims.

Mr. Baker: May I try a different tack? Can the Minister give the House a categoric assurance that 10 per cent. of our energy will be generated from renewable sources by 2010?

Mrs. Liddell: As far as any human being can, yes. The Government are committed to ensuring that 10 per cent. of electricity should be generated from renewables by 2010 and, to ensure that that is not a short-term blip, we intend that to continue to 2025. I hope that by that time, renewables that are far from the market will be closer to it. The proportion of renewables going into electricity generation could increase, but we can ensure that it does by getting the mechanisms right. However, that is not straightforward. We can be sure of achieving it only if we listen closely to the responses from the wide body of expertise out there in the electricity industry, including the renewables industry, and the views of consumers, who will pay for that electricity through their bills. The provision that the Government amendment will remove is wrong in principle. It is beside the point that the drafting also happens to be flawed; it has no place in the Bill.

Now I shall respond to the points on research and development expenditure made by the hon. Member for Lewes. The estimated outturn in 1999–2000 was £10.5 million. We have budgeted for £14 million in 2000–01 and for £18 million next year. That is a considerable increase on the figures that he suggested.

Conservative Members referred to our ability to meet our emissions targets. The Government are well on course to meet the Rio target to keep CO_2 emissions within their 1990 levels, and the Kyoto target of reducing greenhouse gases by 12.5 per cent. by 2012. Power station emissions decreased by more than a quarter between 1990 and 1999. On a temperature-corrected basis, emissions fell by 7 per cent. between 1990 and 1999. Overall emissions from electricity generation have decreased by 28.5 per cent. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton shadows the energy brief and it is important for him to take into account the fact that energy is not the only cause of emissions problems. Transport emissions must be kept under control, for example, and that is taken fully into account in the climate change—

Mr. Gibb: The right hon. Lady will be aware that the CO_2 advantages of the nuclear component of our electricity industry are equivalent to taking half all cars and vehicles off the roads. If she intended to meet the CO_2 emission target by dealing with cars and lorries, we would be talking about considerable remedies on the transport side.

Mrs. Liddell: I think that the hon. Gentleman does not deliberately misunderstand, but I cannot always be sure. Emissions cover energy and transport. He should read the climate change document published a month ago by my Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. This country's draft climate change strategy takes into account not only transport and energy, but energy efficiency, which is another key area covered in the Bill.

In an exchange with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), the hon. Gentleman asked about the status of the duty to promote competition. It is simply not the case that the authority's duty has been demoted. Indeed, the Bill makes it clear that the consumer benefits are to be achieved through effective competition, wherever appropriate. Competition is difficult to achieve in some examples, but we are trying to generate much more in respect of the fuel-poor and those who have pre-payment meters.

The hon. Member for Blaby asked about the photovoltaics issues raised by Dr. Jeremy Leggett, Greenpeace and Forum for the Future. I have answered his

[Mrs. Liddell]

points broadly, but he may be interested in my Department's more general work on photovoltaics. There are three major new initiatives, and the Department of Trade and Industry is contributing some £5 million towards a total estimated investment of £15 million. There is a call for PV systems proposals and components, a domestic PV systems field trial for a minimum of 100 homes, and a demo scheme for large-scale building-integrated photovoltaics. The 50,000 roof programme, which is always used in relation to photovoltaics, would cost the taxpayer £250 million and generate less than half of one tenth of 1 per cent. of the UK's current electricity demand.

The House should resist new clause 2 and support Government amendment No. 3, as we must ensure that we have a coherent energy policy that takes into account the needs of not only existing electricity generation but forthcoming electricity generation. Some mischief has been made concerning the Government's commitment to renewables, but that does the renewables industry no service at all, and also ignores its views. We want to put in place a framework that will move it from the margins to the mainstream.

Mr. Gibb: That was a disappointing debate. We tabled new clause 2 to elicit from the Minister's own mouth a description of the Government's overall energy strategy. It would have taken her no more than a few minutes to precis their energy policy—if, indeed, there is a long-term strategic objective—but it is clear that there is no long-term energy strategy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), the shadow Secretary of State, said on Monday, a piecemeal policy responds to day-to-day crises and events.

6.30 pm

The Minister was wrong to say that there is a clear energy policy for the nuclear industry. Her predictable response to my question was to refer it back to the industry. Nuclear power represents 30 per cent. of energy output. It is no good saying that reducing CO_2 is not just about energy output, but about transportation. If the 30 per cent. nuclear component produced vehicle-type emissions, half the cars in this country would have to be taken off the road. If she is saying that when nuclear power stations are decommissioned she can make up for their lack of CO_2 emissions through transport policies, she will have to have a hugely draconian policy on transportation.

Mrs. Liddell: I sometimes wonder whether the hon. Gentleman listens to what I say. I pointed out that a wide range of issues relate to emissions and affect our CO_2 targets. I get the impression that the hon. Gentleman, who is a committed, right-wing, free marketeer, is now backing off from the use of market mechanisms to determine future generation. Perhaps he should make it clear whether that is Conservative policy.

Mr. Gibb: I should be delighted to make that clear. The market mechanism is fine, except that the previous Conservative Government and this Government have signed up to international agreements to reduce CO_2 emissions. They are an interference in the market mechanism. To enable those targets to be met, the Government must inevitably interfere in the market to encourage or nudge it to deliver what they have signed up to. If there is no nudging, there is no certainty that the targets will be met. They could be met, but there is no certainty that the market will deliver them, because this is an artificial constraint on the market mechanism.

The Government are not fulfilling their duty to explain what will happen in 2012 and beyond as Magnox stations are decommissioned. This is an important point, because there is a genuine concern about what will happen. The Minister has not done herself any favours by failing to set out in straightforward terms what the Government intend to replace nuclear power with. If they are saying that energy efficiency will fill the gap and will make up for 30 per cent. of energy production, and that nuclear power stations will be replaced by gas-fired power stations, there will be a colossal increase in CO_2 emissions. It is not good enough for the Minister to say that that can be dealt with by reducing transportation a little and by energy efficiency measures, because they will not be adequate to deal with the increase in CO_2 caused by the decommissioning of nuclear power stations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) expressed his disappointment at the lack of Government commitment to combined heat and power, which is important because its operation is equivalent to reducing CO_2 emissions by 86 per cent. It not only produces electricity from gas, which is 50 per cent. more efficient than coal or oil as regards CO_2 emissions, but it avoids the need to use other electricity sources to heat greenhouses, factories or homes.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I have a great deal of sympathy with some of the points that the hon. Gentleman makes, but I am intrigued to know whether, if a future Government decided to build more nuclear power stations, Bognor and Littlehampton would be a suitable spot to construct one. If not, why not?

Mr. Gibb: The Minister is going into planning issues. Places around the country already have nuclear power stations, and sites are available there, especially where plants are being decommissioned. That is an issue for the Government. They must address these concerns, and it is no good throwing them back at the Opposition.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I have had a long interest in nuclear power stations, and I can assure my hon. Friend that I have seen all the plans of the sites where people want to put additional nuclear power stations, and his constituency does not feature among them.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby said that it would be wrong not to require electricity companies to purchase surplus electricity from households or small businesses that has been generated by photovoltaic energy, combined heat and power, or wind. The headquarters of The Body Shop in Littlehampton has a wind-turbine generator, which generates much of the power for the company's operations. What is wrong with that? The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs said in Committee that forcing the electricity industry to

buy back surplus electricity would be like requiring Tesco to purchase the lettuces that he grows on his allotment. There is a difference between his lettuces and electricity, because his lettuces wilt over time but electricity is an homogenous product which lasts. It is a fungible asset, which can be sent back down the wires with no deterioration in quality.

Mr. Robathan: The point about the wind-turbine generator at The Body Shop is that people should be encouraged to install small-scale renewable plants—wind-generated or whatever—through net metering, because it will remove the costs. The Government seem to have ignored that. They say that we do not understand, but they seem to have missed the point.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I believe that small generation plants will be the future of renewable energy in this country. Anything that can be done to encourage them, such as net metering, is to be welcomed.

Mr. Bruce: I suspect that the Minister will not speak again. My hon. Friend referred to different forms of fuel. Despite the Minister's challenges about the Government's decision to subsidise coal, she has not said how that affects the CO_2 load and what their long-term policy on coal is.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which I suspect that I can answer. The Government do not have an overall, long-term, strategic energy policy. They merely respond to day-to-day crises and to internal Labour party politics. That was the whole basis of the energy White Paper published in October 1998.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby also made the important point, which had not occurred to me, that the new clause would enable the public to assess the workability of the climate change levy, and to see how much damage it is doing to British industry and to the aims and objects of the levy. He also suggested that the Government were resisting the Liberal Democrat amendment because they were concerned that they could face court action if they failed to deliver on their manifesto promise. Perhaps we should propose that all Labour manifesto promises be put in amendments to Bills. I should like to suggest an amendment to the Finance Bill about the Government not raising taxes, as the Labour party promised time after time before the election.

I was concerned about the right hon. Lady's statement that the Government's target was that 5 per cent. of Britain's electricity requirements would be met from renewables by 2005, not 2003. My memory of the renewable energy consultation document is that the target was 2003, not 2005. *[Interruption.]* I am grateful for sedentary confirmation of that by the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker).

Mrs. Liddell: We are on course to meet the target by 2003.

Mr. Gibb: How does that differ from the Government's target of 2005?

Mrs. Liddell: If it helps the hon. Gentleman, I am prepared to say 2003.

Mr. Gibb: It does help me, because it is consistent with the target that the Government have published in their consultation documents. I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that confirmation.

The hon. Member for Lewes made the obvious point, but made it very well, that the phrase in the Liberal Democrat amendment was lifted from the renewable energy consultation document. It goes to show how meaningless are the Government's promises if they are not prepared to put them into the legislation when it is proposed and passed by the Standing Committee.

This has been a disappointing debate. It was an opportunity for the Government to set out in five or 10 minutes the broad, general thrust of their energy policy. It is a lost opportunity, and it goes to show how important the new clause is, because it would have required the Government to publish details of their energy policy. I am disappointed that the Government will not accept the new clause. However, given that we have had a debate, albeit disappointing, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 9

OBJECTIVES AND DUTIES UNDER 1986 ACT

Mr. Gibb: I beg to move amendment No. 22, in page 6, line 15, leave out "wherever appropriate".

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 29, in page 7, line 6, leave out "Subject to subsection (2)," and insert "In performing that duty".

No. 23, in clause 13, page 9, line 25, leave out "wherever appropriate".

No. 30, in page 10, line 16, leave out "Subject to subsection (2)," and insert "In performing that duty".

Mr. Gibb: Amendments Nos. 22 and 23 amend clause 9 in the case of gas, and clause 13 in the case of electricity. Those clauses are fundamental to the Bill, in that they set out the objectives for the Secretary of State and the regulator.

Under the previous legislation, the primary objectives for the Secretary of State and the regulator consisted of three equal duties:

> to ensure that all reasonable demands for electricity are satisfied . . . to ensure that licence holders are able to finance . . . activities . . . to promote competition in the generation and supply of electricity.

Under the Bill, the sole primary objective is to promote or protect consumer interests. The promotion of competition comes into play only when it is directly appropriate to the protection of the interests of the consumer.

In other words, the promotion of competition has been downgraded to a second priority, despite what the Minister said in an intervention on our debate on new clause 2 and the amendments grouped with it. The phrase "wherever appropriate" inserted before the word "competition" downgrades the promotion of competition, making such promotion possible only when it is appropriate in order to protect the consumer. That is despite the fact that privatisation and competition have produced cuts of 30 per cent. in real terms in electricity prices, and 30 per cent. cuts in gas prices.

[Mr. Gibb]

Privatisation and competition have delivered the best protection for the consumer in terms of better service, lower prices and increased choice. Demoting competition to a second priority reveals the Government's complete lack of understanding of the way in which business and the industry operate. Clause 9 states:

> The principal objective of the Secretary of State and the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority . . . is to protect the interests of consumers . . . wherever appropriate by promoting effective competition.

The insertion of the words "wherever appropriate" downgrades the objective.

Professor Littlechild, who developed the brilliant methodology of rpi minus *x* as a basis for regulating prices in the electricity industry after privatisation, wrote in a pamphlet published recently by the Institute of Economic Affairs:

> The proposed wording of the change here may be positively unhelpful as it puts an additional obstacle in the way of regulators promoting competition. The duty to promote competition will no longer be unqualified. This will have to be demonstrated to be the most appropriate way to protect customers.

In other words, the regulator must face an additional hurdle before he can promote competition. He will have to show that promoting competition will help the consumer.

Such things are always difficult to demonstrate. I have no doubt that promoting competition will help the consumer, but that is sometimes difficult to demonstrate in advance. No doubt all the utility companies will go to considerable lengths to show that greater competition with them will hinder the interests of the consumer, and the regulator will have to try to surmount their arguments. The fear is that that will take place in a court of law, no thanks to the Bill. Amendment No. 22 simply removes the words "wherever appropriate", thus ensuring that the objective of the Secretary of State and the regulator is

> to protect the interests of consumers by promoting effective competition.

We are convinced that the interests of the consumer are best served by the promotion of competition.

The "objective" clauses go to the heart of what the Bill purports to do. It was clear in Committee that there is considerable confusion about what those clauses do, and we hope to establish what they do through our amendments. We are told by the Government that the Bill represents an important change to the regulator's framework for the utilities sector. According to the Minister, the Bill delivers on the promise that the Government made during the general election campaign to achieve open and predictable regulation that is fair to customers and shareholders. She added that it will allow people to benefit from utilities regulation reform in a changing marketplace that will provide many opportunities for better service.

The same triumphalist language was used by the Secretary of State on Second Reading. He said:

> As hon. Members will know, the Government are committed to modernisation and reform in a whole range of important areas of public life. The Utilities Bill is part of that agenda of modernisation and reform. It will deliver efficiency and fairness, bringing together social justice and fairness, two sides of the same coin . . . It puts consumers first and provides a basis for effective competition and a stable framework for regulation.—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 782.]

6.45 pm

That is high-blown language from both the Minister and the Secretary of State, and it contrasts sharply with the words of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, who says that the clauses are not revolutionary:

> we do not expect that there will be a dramatic upheaval—a revolution indeed—in utility regulations . . . The regulatory and economic environment in which utility companies operate will not be turned upside down.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 29 February 2000; c. 234.]

On the one hand, the Government are claiming that the "objectives" clauses and the Bill will change the whole basis of utility regulation, and will make the protection of the consumer the primary duty. On the other hand, the Minister has said that even after the Bill the promotion of competition will be as paramount as before, and that the Bill does nothing very radical.

The Government cannot have it both ways. Either the Bill is radical or it is not; either it changes the framework or it does not. If it does not change the framework, or the objectives of the regulator, what is the point of the clauses?

What matters is the actual wording. As drafted, clauses 9 and 13 introduce a whole new set of priorities for the Secretary of State and the regulator. The objectives that they identify will impose extra costs on the utilities, which will then be passed on to consumers. They will increase regulatory risks, and will therefore add to the capital costs of the utilities. Again, those extra costs will inevitably be passed on to consumers.

If the House accepts clauses 9 and 13 unamended, the promotion of competition will occur only when it can be shown to protect consumers. If the regulator and the Secretary of State have the same philosophical disposition as my hon. Friends and me, and believe that competition will nearly always benefit the consumer and that greater competition will never damage the interests of consumers, I do not doubt that the new regulatory regime will function well, and will continue to deliver greater competition and lower prices. On the other hand, we may have a regulator who shares the Prime Minister's philosophy—if, indeed, the Prime Minister has a philosophy other than that of political manoeuvring and analysis. Back in 1988, during the Committee stage of the Electricity Bill, the Prime Minister said:

> outside the Conservative party . . . it is barely in issue that prices will rise because of privatisation.—[*Official Report*, 12 December 1988; Vol. 143, c. 681.]

I do not know whether the regulator will share those views, or the Prime Minister's other view of privatisation. He has said that the idea that we would have an influx of power stations all competing on the grid was nonsense.

Of course, we did have an influx of new power stations, and they are all competing on the grid. We did see, and continue to see, falling electricity and, indeed, gas prices. If the Labour party still believes that privatisation and competition will not promote lower prices and more choice, I am concerned.

Given the Government's proclivity to promote their cronies, or people with the same political outlook, to positions of power, I would be concerned if a future regulator holding views similar to those of the Prime Minister sought to fulfil the obligations in clauses 9 and 13, because he or she would never hold the view that the promotion of competition would protect the interests

of consumers. The amendments would removed the words "wherever appropriate", thus removing the element of subjectivity. The amended clause would require the regulator to protect consumers by promoting competition, which is the position in the current regulatory regime. The Minister says that that is all the clause does anyway, so he should have no problem with the amendment.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): I want to make a brief contribution to argue that the words "wherever appropriate" are necessary. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) presented a theoretical concern about the impact of the clause. I want to address a practical issue, which is the disparity in charges faced by customers in the supply of gas.

In Britain today, people who are poor pay 20 per cent. more for their supply of gas. That is the difference between the charge paid by people who pay by direct debit and that paid by those who pay by pre-payment meter.

The figures are startling. For 650 therms of gas, a customer pays £281 by direct debit, £320 by standard quarterly credit and £336 by pre-payment meter—for the same amount of gas.

Mr. Gibb: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, during the Committee stage, his Government proposed amendments that gave the gas and electricity industries the right to access property to install a pre-payment meter against the wishes of the customer? At the moment, they cannot enter to install such a meter because it is the choice of the customer: he or she decides whether to have the meter. That person can be cut off, but having such a meter is the choice of the customer. As a result of the Bill as amended, it will no longer be the choice of the customer. I agree with him. Pre-payment meters are extortionate and they are wrong. Now his Government have given the right of entry to install those things against the wishes of consumers.

Mr. Benn: I am aware that that is the case. My point is about the charge that the gas companies levy.

I realise that not all pre-payment meter users are on low incomes, but the Government themselves estimate that 24 per cent. of households receiving income support pay for their gas by pre-payment meter. A recent MORI poll clearly shows that the use of pre-payment meters increases the lower down the socio-economic groups we go. Over half the users of pre-payment meters are people in households who are not working and a quarter are one-parent families.

I wanted to make the point in relation to the gas companies; that is the object of my contribution. It is extraordinary that the highest charges are levied on those with the lowest incomes.

The issue has been the subject of debate for quite some time. The Public Accounts Committee has commented on it. The recent report of the Gas Consumers Council says:

> It is time pre-payment meter consumers benefited from the liberalised gas market.

I welcome the clause and other clauses. I welcome the reference to "wherever appropriate" because it can be used to hasten the day when the practice of charging the poor more can be brought to an end and consigned to history, where it belongs.

Mr. Stunell: I want to speak in support of amendments Nos. 29 and 30, and against the Conservative amendment, which the Liberal Democrats think is mistaken. It is clear that there are occasions on which the guiding force cannot be the straight issue of competition—the form that would be left if the words were deleted. The two amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) relating to gas and electricity are mistaken. I associate myself with the words of the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) in that regard.

Through our amendments, we are trying to reintroduce into the debate some of the issues that were discussed in Committee, but not dealt with sufficiently. The amendments would ensure that a broader duty was placed on the regulator—a duty not confined solely to issues of competition.

We have sought to delete the words "Subject to subsection (2)" in subsection (5). Subsection (2) places on the regulator the requirement to put competition first and foremost—before all other considerations. If subsection (2) is removed, issues relating to environmental and social and welfare activities can be given the significance that they deserve.

I return to the point that I made earlier. We are talking not simply of regulating competition but of regulating to achieve the overall policy objectives of this Government and, I believe, any Government: the protection of consumers on low incomes—a matter referred to by the hon. Member for Leeds, Central—and the protection of the environment, an issue over which the Minister was disturbingly glib in winding up the previous debate. It is absolutely clear that, as the decades go forward, the implementation of sound environmental policies will be highly dependent on the regulator having the power, the ability and, in some cases, the duty to act not solely on price and competition matters.

These two simple amendments are designed to swing the balance of the Bill back towards the environmental agenda. They have wide support among non-governmental organisations and groups outside the House that have been supplying information and support to Members and to Ministers. I will leave it at that, and simply urge the Government to have yet another look at the key issue of balancing their declared environmental policy objectives with the powers and duties that they are prepared to give those who have to implement their policies under the Bill.

Dr. Howells: There are some activities connected with the supply of gas and electricity in which competition simply cannot protect the interests of consumers. It is that practicality that Opposition Members have forgotten in tabling amendments Nos. 22 and 23.

There are natural monopolies—gas pipeline and electricity distribution networks, for example—in which it will never be cost-effective to develop competition. To facilitate competition in such activities would require the construction of duplicate networks, at colossal expense and with devastating consequences for the environment. Such action would rarely be in the interests of consumers.

Where natural monopolies exist, it is right that the interests of consumers should be protected by some means other than competition. That is why the regulator is given discretion to determine whether the promotion of competition is the most appropriate means of protecting

[Dr. Howells]

the interests of consumers—although competition should be the regulator's first choice in the absence of a good reason to the contrary.

Where there are natural monopolies in which competition is powerless to protect consumers, what is a regulator to do? The amendments are silent on that point, so presumably the intention is that the regulator should do nothing at all. Certainly, the obligation to protect the interests of consumers would no longer apply. The amendments risk leaving the consumer exposed to exploitation by companies operating in monopoly markets, which is precisely what regulation is intended to prevent. I ask the House to reject amendments Nos. 22 and 23.

I do not fault the motives of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) in tabling amendments Nos. 29 and 30, but they shoot at the wrong target. The regulator's principal objective is cast in terms of protecting the interests of consumers, wherever appropriate by promoting effective competition. That objective reflects the basic rationale for the existence of gas and electricity regulation.

Although we recognise the necessity of ensuring that the environmental dimension of utility regulation is properly managed, we do not believe that environmental considerations should be part of the duty to further the principal objective. In the final analysis, the Bill is about economic rather than environmental regulation. The current status of duties ensures that, when making a choice between alternatives of equal benefit to the consumer, the regulator should lean towards the one that is most favourable from an environmental perspective. We think that that is the right outcome. I ask the House to resist amendments Nos. 29 and 30.

Mr. Gibb: That was a rapid and disappointing reply. I thought that the debate required something a little more substantial than that.

The hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) raised his concern about the use of pre-payment meters, which will result in significantly higher gas bills for the poorest consumers. He makes a valid point. The same point applies to customers of electricity suppliers. It has long been my view—and, indeed, the view of many Conservative Members—that pre-payment meters hark back to a bygone era when gas and electricity suppliers were monopoly industries owned by the state. Monopoly state companies were able to treat their customers in that way. Rather than trying to sort out a person's slight payment problem, as many private sector companies now try to do, monopoly companies can simply install pre-payment meters and use their monopoly power to charge customers 10 to 25 per cent. more than they charge other customers—

7 pm

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We come now to the Private Bill set down for this hour.

As there is no one in the Chamber to move it, we will continue with the Utilities Bill.

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Member for Leeds, Central made some valid points on pre-payment meters.

I strongly believe that pre-payment meters would not be used if we had increased competition in the utilities industries. As competition has increased, companies such as PowerGen have done deals with organisations such as Age Concern to provide a package of services to various groups which have not previously been the suppliers' prime targets. The more competition that we have, the more fierce companies will be in trying to target all groups in society as valuable customers. Without competition, companies may believe that it is too expensive to provide services to those groups.

The Minister said that if the phrase "wherever appropriate" were removed from clause 9, on natural monopolies, the regulator would be forced to require increased competition in sectors in which, because of a natural monopoly, competition cannot possibly operate. The gas and electricity distribution networks, for example, are natural monopolies, as they will be the foreseeable future.

The Minister's warnings are not justified by the operation of the previous regulatory regime, under which companies were not required to create new gas or electricity distribution networks. Such requirements have not been imposed under the current regulatory regime, and they would not be imposed under the proposed regime if the words "wherever appropriate" were removed from clause 9.

The issue reveals that the Government still do not understand the efficacy of increased competition in delivering benefits for consumers. It is disappointing that they have not been able to accept this group of amendments, but, in view of the debate, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 10

GUIDANCE ON SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS IN RELATION TO GAS

Mr. Gibb: I beg to move amendment No. 24, in page 8, line 2, after "Parliament", insert—

'together with an impact assessment of the extent to which any additional costs incurred by the Authority, Council or licence holders consequent on implementing the guidance will be passed on to consumers.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 25, in clause 14, page 11, line 11, after "Parliament", insert—

'together with an impact assessment of the extent to which any additional costs incurred by the Authority, Council or licence holders consequent on implementing the guidance will be passed on to consumers.'.

Mr. Gibb: Clause 10, on gas, and clause 14, on electricity, give the Secretary of State the power to issue guidance to the regulator, to impose on utilities a range of new social and environmental objectives. As hon. Members will be aware, the regulatory framework, which was introduced by the previous Government, already contains a requirement that the regulator should have

regard to the interests of vulnerable consumers such as the chronically sick and disabled, people in rural communities and the elderly.

It is quite right that there should be such a requirement, as a monopolistic supplier may well decide not to supply those groups, who sometimes may be less profitable than other groups. However, in a fiercely competitive environment, those groups become important customers whom all the companies in that environment want to target and win over. The regulator essentially mimics the force of competition in monopoly or near-monopoly environments, in which protecting those groups becomes an important objective.

Clauses 10 and 14 go beyond that position and are more about using the regulatory framework and machinery to deliver the Government's social objectives—which, more properly, should be delivered in other Government programmes and by Departments such as the Department of Social Security and the Department of Health.

The guidance issued by the Secretary of State could add significantly to utilities companies' costs. Subsequently—according to the Government's own regulatory impact assessment—those costs will be passed on to consumers. That is why the Opposition are concerned both about the specific provisions and about the Bill. We are concerned that legislation trumpeted by the Government as being beneficial for consumers will add to the electricity and gas prices that consumers pay.

The guidance to be issued by the Secretary of State is not a minor matter or small beer. In Committee, it was made all too clear thanks to the diligent probing of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) that Ofgem is incurring escalating property costs. It is moving its offices from Birmingham to London, where it will occupy nice offices in Millbank designed to house 450 staff, when having combined Ofgas and Offer staffs, it employs only 400 staff. That number could increase to 430 once the offices are fully merged, but only 350 staff will move into the plush and expensively refurbished new offices in Millbank, leaving room for another 100 staff. Another 80 staff members will occupy offices in Leicester and Glasgow.

In a Select Committee investigation, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) discovered that Ofgem's forecast expenditure is set to rise from £29.8 million annually three years ago, to £64.5 million in 2000-01. In Committee, the Minister said that the colossal increase was a consequence of meeting the redundancy costs associated with the move from Birmingham to London and of making the one-off expenditure of £13.2 million on the new electricity trading arrangements project. However, even taking those factors into account, the increase in regulatory costs is significant. All those costs will be recouped from utilities companies. Ultimately, according to the Government's regulatory impact assessment, the costs will be passed on to consumers.

The direct regulatory costs are only part of the story. Utilities companies will also incur significant costs in responding to the plethora of new information requests that will arise from the Bill's provisions. Those costs, too, will be passed on to consumers.

Utilities will incur costs in implementing the Secretary of State's guidance to the regulator, and those costs will be passed on to consumers. Those costs—which will be the largest extra costs faced by consumers—will be a direct result of the guidance. Although the word "guidance" is used, the guidance will in fact be orders, and the regulator will have to obey them—both because the Bill states that the authority should have regard to them, and because the regulator will probably wish eventually to be reappointed by the Secretary of State. Therefore, the guidances issued by the Secretary of State will almost certainly be directives.

Draft guidances have already been published by the Secretary of State. One draft guidance states that the authority should have regard to the Government's objective of improving the "health of everyone". Such guidance is incredibly broad and potentially extremely burdensome. It also generally reflects the Government's social and political agenda. The Government clearly envisage that policy objectives will be delivered by the regulatory framework and mechanism, and implemented by private sector electricity and gas companies. Nevertheless, such an objective—on improving the "health of everyone"—is far too wide for the regulator to deliver.

Other guidances provide Ofgem with the objectives of tackling poverty and social exclusion and reducing the proportion of unfit housing stock. It surprises me that the Secretary of State has not issued guidances on ending world hunger and creating world peace. The guidances are drafted incredibly widely, leaving the regulator with enormous discretion as to how to interpret them, in new licence conditions for the utilities or new performance standards.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I apologise to the House for not being in the Chamber earlier, although I have been following the debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that the provisions are drafted so broadly will be a disincentive to companies to invest in the industry for fear that there will be Government regulation on such a scale that they will be unable to make future projections of income?

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. The wide drafting of the guidance will increase regulatory risk, and that will have two severe consequences for the consumer. First, it will raise the cost of capital, as investors will require compensation for the extra risk. That will mean higher interest charges and expenses. The companies involved are capital intensive and have large borrowings, so the cost will be passed on to the consumer in higher prices or prices that would otherwise have been lower.

Secondly, as my hon. Friend said, the guidances will deter some companies from entering the industry and will therefore reduce competition. As we all know, competition drives down prices and forces companies to be more efficient. There will be a tad less pressure from increased competition.

It may surprise some hon. Members to hear that, despite the fact that the Utilities Bill is still going through Parliament, Ofgem has widely consulted consumer groups, industry and Government on how it intends to implement the Government's draft guidance, although that

[Mr. Gibb]

guidance has still to be approved by an affirmative resolution of the House. Not only has the Bill not yet received Royal Assent—although Ofgem is busy consulting on it—but the draft guidance issued by the Secretary of State has not yet been considered by the House. That cannot happen until the Bill has received Royal Assent. The guidance will then be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. If it gets through both Houses of Parliament, it will then become law. Despite all that, Ofgem is already consulting.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am sure that my hon. Friend will have noticed during our discussion of the Bill that the civil servants seem to be running the Ministers. Has he noticed that organisations such as the authority and the council have been putting their own spin on the provisions, rather than waiting for Parliament? Did he see the letter from the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council of 31 March, saying that it plans to table amendments to the Bill when it reaches another place as it does not like what the Government have done so far? Who is running this? It is certainly not the Government.

Mr. Gibb: Yes, I read that comment. I am concerned that unelected bodies such as Ofgem take it upon themselves to decide policy and to consult on it. It is a general concern about the political situation in Britain that people are beginning to hold politicians in less esteem, and that decisions are being made by those who are not elected. That gives rise to concern in the longer run about the future of our democratic institutions.

Despite everything, Ofgem has undertaken wide consultation with the Government, industry and consumer groups and has produced a social action plan. I note that it is not a draft social action plan, although it is based on various drafts, but a final version. It sets out in more detail how it intends to implement the guidances issued by the Secretary of State. In addition, an Ofgem press release said in early March:

> Ofgem has also appointed a 10 member review panel bringing together consumer groups, Government and representatives of the energy and banking industries. Regular reports on progress against the plan will also be published.

Callum McCarthy, the chairman of the new authority, stated:

> There are many customers who either because of low income or poor housing find it difficult to afford heat and light for their homes. This is a big and complex problem which requires many parts of Government and the industry to contribute to solutions. Through the social action plan Ofgem will concentrate on taking effective action to tackle this problem to make a difference for low income and disadvantaged customers.

7.15 pm

It is abundantly clear that Ofgem will impose on the gas and electricity industries considerable financial costs in respect of implementing the Government's social agenda. Few can object to the elected Government of the day implementing a social agenda. It is almost par for the course that a Labour Government will want to spend public money on such imperatives and to raise the funds for the projects through taxation. However, we find it objectionable that the Government are implementing such programmes by imposing significant extra costs on the electricity and gas companies. As the Government have acknowledged, those costs will be passed on to consumers in their gas and electricity bills. Instead of paying for their programmes through the tax system, which has been designed to raise money according to people's ability to pay, the Government are funding them through electricity and gas bills that depend on how much electricity and gas people use—so large families and pensioners will pay more because they use more fuel energy than other groups in society.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Would it not be more honest if companies were allowed to state on the bills that they send to consumers what effect the Government's measures were having?

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Of course the customers would all be up in arms, so I do not expect that the Government will do that, although it would increase honesty in politics, which is important, and enable people to know how much extra they were having to spend as a result of the Government's programmes.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way to me a second time. Does he agree that the on-costs to which he is referring will suffer a time delay? I rather suspect that the Government are being cynical. While hon. Members on both sides of the House would welcome anything that will help poorer families, the Government are ensuring that increases in gas and electricity prices probably will not take effect for one or two years hence—after the next general election. Is that not a cynical move?

Mr. Gibb: The Bill will receive Royal Assent later this year and the measures will be implemented in the next few years, so my hon. Friend is right. What he says backs up the point that, if the Government were honest, they would raise the funds through taxation and spend it through Government spending programmes. Where is the logic or the equity in what they propose? It is no honest way to run a Government programme or to develop a social agenda. How does it help the consumer to be saddled with potentially huge extra costs?

The Green Paper that heralded the Bill recognised the risk inherent in such reforms to the regulatory regime when it said:

> If the Government concludes that its social and environmental policy objectives require action which would have significant financial implications for consumers or for the regulated companies, such action should be taken forward by means of new specific provisions in primary or secondary legislation rather than through guidance to the regulators.

The indication so far is that the Government's promise in that Green Paper is not being adhered to by Ofgem or, indeed, by the Secretary of State. The guidances clearly impose burdensome costs on industry. Those costs will be passed on to the consumer so, in the words of the Green Paper, there will be

> significant financial implications for consumers.

Amendments Nos. 24 and 25 would add to clauses 10 and 14 a requirement that the Secretary of State prepares an impact assessment of the extent to which any additional costs incurred by the authority, the consumer council or licence holders as a result of implementing the guidance will be passed on to consumers. It is important

that the Government fully understand the financial implications of their proposed measures and, in particular, how those costs will be met and by whom. If the Minister really is on the side of the consumer, he should have no problem with accepting the amendments.

Dr. Howells: I am sure that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis (Mr. Gibb) will not be surprised to learn that I have problems with the amendments. *[Interruption.]* I forgot that his constituency includes Littlehampton, which will probably be the site of the next nuclear reactor.

As the hon. Gentleman told us, amendments Nos. 24 and 25 seek to oblige the Secretary of State to provide Parliament with an assessment of how actions taken by the authority, the council and licence-holders in pursuit of policies and objectives in the guidance are likely to impact on consumers in terms of costs. That assessment is to be laid before Parliament together with the draft guidance. However, amendments of this type, which attempt to define or limit the potential costs resulting from the guidance, are misguided and unnecessary.

Such amendments are unnecessary because the Government will not use the guidance as a means of giving effect to measures that would have significant financial implications for consumers or companies. We have made that clear throughout the utilities review. The amendments are misguided because the Opposition fail to grasp the fact that this clause provides for the Secretary of State to issue guidance, not direction, to the authority. As can be seen from the draft guidance to the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority published in February, the guidance will not be highly detailed or prescriptive. It will simply set out the social and environmental policies and objectives to which the authority should make an appropriate contribution.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: No, I wish to make some progress. Moreover, the hon. Gentleman has hardly been in the Chamber this evening.

Such guidance will give the authority a necessary degree of latitude to act as it deems appropriate in the context of its framework of statutory duties and the regulatory circumstances at the time.

As it is the authority that must decide how to act on the policies and objectives in the guidance, it will not be possible for the Secretary of State to provide Parliament with any kind of realistic assessment as to the costs that might result. The only way that the Secretary of State could provide such an assessment would be to issue directions to the authority on the contribution that it should make towards the Government's social and environmental objectives. The Government have rejected that option, as it would contravene the principle of arm's length economic regulation. For all those reasons, we shall resist amendments Nos. 24 and 25.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am surprised that the Minister treated the amendments so peremptorily. The Government will impose on consumers a whole raft of new stealth taxes— [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It is interesting that Labour Members groan, because they freely admitted in Committee, where perhaps people do not listen so carefully, how much will be added to consumers' bills. Although they gave some assurances in Committee about how much money would be added, they admitted that there would be no restraints on the amount that could be added to people's bills on the wide basis of social and environmental interference in the electricity and gas markets. Ministers will be able to fiddle about with all sorts of regulations. The Bill will also give enormous power and influence to Ofgem and to the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank my hon. Friend for being kind enough to give way to me, unlike the Minister who churlishly chose not to do so.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government will achieve the worst of both worlds? On the one hand, they say that they will not give clear direction, and on the other, they say that they will give guidance that will be so broad that the regulator will not know how to act. Would it not be better either to remain at arm's length and give no guidance or to give clear direction? At the moment, nobody knows what will happen and investors will be deterred from investing in the industry, which will put prices up.

Mr. Bruce: My hon. Friend makes some valuable points. The problem is that the Government are tinkering at the margins. Government thinking is, "Well, the Conservative Government put £1 on people's bills doing good environmental things, and we will put six times as much—or perhaps 12 or 14 times as much—on bills to start with." The amendments are necessary because no limit has been put on the amount. We are relying on the Government's reasonableness. We saw that so-called reasonableness when they decided to put additional taxes on motorists. Those taxes became so unreasonable that even this Government had to U-turn, because the escalator increased fuel duty way beyond the point of achieving anything good. The Conservative Government achieved what they set out to achieve by putting the escalator on fuel, which was to ensure that cars were more efficient than before.

The amendments would require the Government to include an assessment of the costs involved in the advice that they give. I hope also that the Government will include an assessment of the benefits that are intended to flow from that expenditure. People constantly claim that this or that regulation is good news without assessing the cost or the advantages. However, whenever the Government are questioned on such issues, they treat the House as we have just been treated by the Minister. He can be eloquent and he knows his subject, but when he has something to hide he can be brief. He thinks that he has answered the debate, but he has not. He has made an opening statement on behalf of the Government and I hope that you will allow him to catch your eye again, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Fabricant: I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) overheard the Minister say that he planned to put a nuclear power station in Littlehampton. That announcement, which was made before—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a sensible intervention.

Mr. Bruce: My hon. Friend was simply repeating what the Minister said earlier, when he threatened my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) with having the next nuclear power station—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman should now get back to the amendments before the House.

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is important to consider the effect of clause 10. What additional costs will be incurred by the authority, the council and licence-holders consequent on implementing the guidance, and how will that be passed on to consumers? The Government have introduced a clever mechanism that will not show up in public expenditure or taxation. The authority will be given authorisation by the Government to undertake certain measures and can tax the electricity and gas companies to pay for those measures, the cost of which will have to be passed on to consumers as a stealth tax. The consumer will get a bill without knowing that it has been increased by the same amount as every other gas bill, from whichever company supplies the gas or electricity. That is why it is a stealth tax. With the amendment, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton has offered the Government a helpful way to be honest.

7.30 pm

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend think that the idea put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) is a good one? He proposed that a statement should be included in electricity and gas bills to show what proportion of the total results from Government policies. Was he present for the presentation of an excellent ten-minute rule Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), which proposed disclosure, in petrol prices, of the amount of tax levied in those prices?

Mr. Bruce: I am sorry that I was not present for that because I was busy preparing this long and detailed speech, but I am sure that it is precisely analogous to what we are looking for.

In Standing Committee, we discovered that the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority had bought a big City office block, with lots of glass and marble. Such costs are passed on to consumers, effectively by means of a stealth tax on the electricity and gas companies. A letter from the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council talks about the amendments that it will table in the House of Lords. I suppose that cronies will be appointed for that purpose, or else someone in the system will do it. One imagines that that council will be the consumer's friend, but that is not the case. It has costs and, under the Bill, they will be passed on in the same way.

Will the new council tell consumers about the cost of the new authority? I suspect that it will not, and that the authority will claim to be really good value for money compared with the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council.

I hope that I have encouraged the Minister to give a good response on those points to the House and to the country.

Mr. Syms: This is the first time that I have contributed to the debate on this important Bill. I support amendments Nos. 24 and 25, which have been tabled in an honest and straightforward manner by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb).

My hon. Friend has done Parliament a great service. Clause 10 provides that any guidance has to be laid before Parliament, but the House always has a problem with measurement. To do our job properly, we must assess the effect of any measure introduced by the Government.

Amendment No. 24 centres around the impact assessment. It is not always possible for hon. Members to weigh up a cost. In Standing Committee, we have to debate topics very quickly. The impact assessment would enable us to reach better decisions with full information. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton pointed out, a measure's consequences on bills are not always clear in the short term, but they can be substantial over a period of time.

In my earlier intervention, I said that it would be more honest if bills contained information about the economic impact of Government policies. That would be more honest and transparent, but I can understand why the Government oppose that proposal, as it would show their intentions for the authority.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) said that costs imposed on a private business amount to a stealth tax that will be passed on to consumers. Many people, such as pensioners, have difficulty paying their gas and electricity bills, and hon. Members hear many complaints about the cost of those services. The Bill will have an indirect and hidden impact on heating costs.

The House often debates ways to help elderly and vulnerable people in the winter. Governments of all complexions like to make much of the sums that they make available to help people pay their heating bills. However, the costs incurred under clause 10 will have an impact on real people in real homes in real winters.

I support amendment No. 24, which I think would make the Bill more honest and would lead to better measurement.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government would accept the amendment if they had nothing to hide? By resisting the amendment, they are implicitly admitting that there will be significant on-charges to gas and electricity bills in the years to come.

Mr. Syms: All hon. Members—including Conservative Members—are always tempted to interfere. It is our natural instinct. It is easy to sign up to international agreements, such as the Rio accord, that impact on domestic policy, and to frame a policy for next week or next month, without thinking through the implications.

Amendment No. 24 would mean that the Government would have to justify the impact assessment findings in Standing Committee. That would be good for the Government, as they too would have to reconsider the measure, with the result that they might realise that

the cost was greater than predicted and that they should rethink the proposal. That would concentrate the Government's mind and lead to more transparent and better government.

These days, we believe in inclusive government, modernisation and freedom of information. I think that an impact assessment would be as helpful to the Government as it would be to the Opposition, whose role is to question the Government and ensure that they have thought their policies through.

Mr. Gibb: I am disappointed that the Minister does not want to respond. He jumped up immediately at the start of the debate, without waiting to hear the comments of other hon. Members. However, we can continue the debate without his involvement, if that is how it has to be.

The Minister is wrong not to accept the amendments. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) said, if the Government have nothing to hide they should accept the amendments and prepare the impact assessment. The Government seem convinced that the consumer will not suffer from extra costs being imposed on them as a result of the Bill. I am convinced otherwise, as are other Conservative Members.

The guidance that has been issued is broadly drafted. Even in the more narrowly drafted interpretation of that guidance prepared in the Ofgem consultation document from which I quoted, it is clear that the social action plan will cause significant costs to be incurred by the utility companies. Those costs will have to be passed on to the consumer. That is the point that Labour Members fail to understand. They view business as a bottomless pit full of vast amounts of cash for Rolls-Royce cars and luxury yachts for the directors of companies and shareholders. They think it best to grab that money and use it for social programmes, but that is not how business works. In fact, businesses must maximise profits to satisfy investors and shareholders. If they do not do that, business people will find themselves out of a job.

As a result, even if the regulator regulates the price mechanism on the basis of the retail prices index minus x, all the costs will be passed on to the consumer. In addition, consumers will face a tripling of the energy efficiency levy as a result of the Bill. Conservatives fully support energy efficiency. It clearly will not yield the result for which the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe hopes—the replacement of nuclear power—but we can seek to reduce CO_2 emissions by ensuring that we do not waste electricity in homes and businesses.

Mr. Ian Bruce: My hon. Friend has moved on rather quickly from the fat cats. Does he appreciate—as would most people who can do simple mathematics—that when a gas or electricity company is forced to raise its prices by 10 or 20 per cent. because of the Government's measures, the regulator will increase the profit that it is allowed to make? The regulator calculates profit according to total costs, and if the costs rise by 10 or 20 per cent., so do the profits. The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs is trying to improve the situation for the fat cats, who will doubtless turn up as Labour party supporters and donors before they end up in the House of Lords where they can approve the Government's amendments.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The costs legitimately incurred by companies can be used as a basis for future price increases. If the regulator regards the costs as legitimate, those costs will form the basis of future price reviews. The costs will simply be passed on to the consumer.

The Bill is particularly irritating in that the general increase in competition that is occurring in the industry thanks to privatisation and the opening up of markets by the Conservative Government is continually bringing down prices, even under the meddlesome stewardship of the Labour Government. Many extra costs will be lost, because prices will not necessarily rise. Neither, however, will they fall by as much as they otherwise would have.

Consumers are losing out. They are not benefiting by as much as they should from falling prices, and are suffering from hidden measures, such as the tripling of the energy efficiency levy from £1.20 to £3.60 on the average bill. That increase applies to each utility, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) often points out. In fact, it will mean an average £7.20 levy on bills, which is a form of stealth taxation. It is not an honest way in which to govern in a mature democracy.

The use of stealth taxes has arisen as a direct consequence of Lady Thatcher's having made it impossible for any Government to increase the rate of income tax since the time when she was Prime Minister. It is now politically unacceptable to raise the basic rate or the upper rate. Governments have therefore found other methods of raising taxes, and the Government are past masters at doing so by stealth. It is time that we exposed stealth taxes so that our mature democracy can assess how much tax we are paying and how much public expenditure we are prepared to pay for.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) for his point about indirect and hidden ways in which the Government are raising funds to implement their social programmes. I am disappointed—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry to repeat that phrase, and sorry that the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe objects to it, but I am disappointed by the hurried response of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs to a serious debate during the Report stage of what is supposed to be a flagship Bill. Despite my disappointment, and in view of the fact that we have had a debate, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 19

PROVISION OF ADVICE AND INFORMATION TO PUBLIC AUTHORITIES AND OTHER PERSONS

7.45 pm

Dr. Cable: I beg to move amendment No. 35, in page 14, line 17, leave out "or body".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 36, in page 14, line 18, leave out from beginning to "or" in line 19.

No. 38, in page 14, line 25, leave out from "body" to end of line 28.

Dr. Cable: May I first seek your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on a point of information? My colleagues and I tabled four amendments that were logically connected, but

[Dr. Cable]

the Chair, in its wisdom, has chosen three of them, but not the fourth, on which, in fact, the three were contingent. The effect of that is the amendments that we are debating would have exactly the opposite effect to that which we intended.

May I ask whether the Speaker's provisional selection list is sufficiently provisional to allow for the readmission of amendment No. 33, or could you give me further advice on how I should proceed?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that Madam Speaker's decision on the selection of amendments is final.

Dr. Cable: Naturally, I accept your judgment, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall therefore speak briefly on the three amendments, but shall not waste the House's time by entering into prolonged debate on amendments that we acknowledge to be defective as they stand.

The Bill uses commercial confidentiality as a broad brush exemption from information that can be made available through the National Consumer Council. We regard that as a serious defect, which undermines the openness and transparency that we would wish from the consumer protection regime. We recognise that commercial confidentiality must sometimes be honoured and accepted, but a balance has to be struck between confidentiality and the right to know and to freedom of information.

Our amendments were intended to try to ensure that a balance would be struck and that the council would have an obligation to balance commercial confidentiality against the value of open information. In the event of a dispute between those two objectives, the matter would have been referred to the Information Commission. I regret that because of the way in which the amendments have emerged, their effect would be to narrow freedom of information rather than broaden it. I do not want to achieve that, so I shall not trouble the Government to produce a reply. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 35

ELECTRICITY LICENCE MODIFICATION REFERENCES

Amendment made: No. 1, in page 34, line 34, at end insert—

'( ) In subsection (6), after "this section" there is inserted "or in carrying out functions under section 14A", after "the investigation" there is inserted "or the carrying out of those functions" and after "such investigation" there is inserted "or such functions".'.—*[Mrs. Liddell.]*

Clause 37

MODIFICATION FOLLOWING REPORT

Amendment made: No. 2, in page 35, line 42, at end insert—

' "(5) After considering any representations or objections made in response to proposals set out in a notice under subsection (3), the Authority shall give notice to the Competition Commission—

(a) setting out the modifications it proposes to make to remedy or prevent the adverse effects specified in the report; and

(b) stating the reasons for making the modifications.

(6) The Authority shall include with the notice under subsection (5) a copy of any representations or objections received in relation to the notice under subsection (3).

(7) If the period of four weeks from the date on which the notice under subsection (5) is given elapses without a direction under section 14A(1)(a) having been given to it, the Authority shall—

(a) make the modifications set out in the notice; or

(b) if a direction under section 14A(1)(b) has been given, make the modifications which are not specified in the direction.'.—*[Mrs. Liddell.]*

Clause 48

GENERAL DUTIES OF ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTORS

Amendment proposed: No. 28, in page 48, line 36, at end insert—

':—

(c) to facilitate the development of embedded generation;

(d) to support the achievement of the Government's national renewable energy targets by facilitating small-scale renewable generation through net metering.'.—*[Mr. Stunell.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 31, Noes 261.

Division No. 172] **[7.47 pm**

AYES

Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Kirkwood, Archy
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tyler, Paul
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Heath and
Dr. Jenny Tonge.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*

Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Mr. Tony McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 57

Financial Penalties

8 pm

Mr. Gibb: I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 54, line 46, at end insert—

'(9) No penalty fixed by the Authority under this section may exceed 5 per cent. of the turnover of the licence holder (determined in accordance with such provisions as may be specified in an order made by the Secretary of State).'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 27, in clause 92, page 92, line 10, at end insert—

'(9) No penalty fixed by the Authority under this section may exceed 5 per cent. of the turnover of the licence holder (determined in accordance with such provisions as may be specified in an order made by the Secretary of State).'.

Mr. Gibb: The element of the Bill that is most universally criticised—there are many contender elements within it for that prize—is the penalty provisions in clauses 57 and 92. The provisions are criticised for imposing strict liability on utilities. The Gas and Electricity Markets Authority can impose a fine regardless of culpability. The Bill is criticised because it applies to past transgressions regardless of the fact that a contravention was remedied as soon as it was made known. The current system works well, but the approach set out in the Bill is far more heavy handed. Companies can be fined for transgressions even when they have been put right after they have been notified of them.

Under the current regime, once a transgression occurs, the regulator will inform the utility that it has contravened a licence condition or has failed to perform to the correct standards as set out in its performance requirements. It will then have a chance to put things right. After that, an order will be issued to make the utility do so. Only after that does the regulator issue an order that results in the utility being punished. That seems a far better approach to penalty provisions than what we have in the Bill.

The clauses are criticised generally for their extremely limited appeal provisions, which amount to less than the appeal possibilities that are available under the judicial review rules. The element of the clauses that is most criticised is the fine itself, which has no upper limit. Clause 57 for electricity and clause 92 for gas provide only that the authority may impose on the licence holder a penalty of such amount as is reasonable in all the circumstances of the case. There is no mention of an upper limit. The fine could be £100, £1 million, £100 million or £100 billion. That is why the Electricity Association has said:

> The Bill does not set an upper limit for the financial penalty. It is the policy intention that any penalty imposed will be reasonable and proportionate to the contravention or failure. However, in the absence of firm legal provision, the Authority has considerable discretion, the very element that the Bill aims to eradicate. The electricity industry finds the Bill to be lacking in this respect and would wish to see a cap on the penalty that the Authority is able to impose included in the Bill.

The entire electricity industry finds the provision unacceptable. It creates discretion and uncertainty in a Bill that, as we have been told time and again by the Secretary of State and other Ministers, has been drafted to eradicate uncertainty and to introduce a more certain regulatory framework. It does not have that effect in respect of its financial penalty provisions.

PowerGen's view of the provisions is as follows:

> Companies are already subject to a variety of financial sanctions under the Companies Act 2000—

I think that it means the Companies Act 1998—

> under price controls imposed by the regulator, and the compensation requirements to customers where service standards are not met . . . companies should not be exposed to the multiple risk of incurring financial penalties from a number of different sources, each determined in isolation. The level of any fine should take into account other financial sanctions on companies and the Bill should impose an upper limit on the level of fines that can be imposed.

The concerns of the electricity and gas industries are that the Competition and Service (Utilities) Act 1992, which sets a limit on fines, can impose—

Mr. Syms: Is there not also concern that if markets appreciate that the company may be fined and they cannot quantify what that fine will be, that may lead to unreasonable gyrations of the share price, with an impact on investment?

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. It reveals the Government's lack of understanding of capital markets and how they work.

The 1992 Act, which sets a limit, can impose fines of up to 10 per cent. of annual turnover. Under secondary legislation, that fine can be imposed, while the Bill is going through the House, for three years' worth of annual turnover. That results effectively in a fine equal to 30 per cent. of annual turnover. It is a real possibility that fines under the Bill could exceed these enormous sums, as the Government have not seen fit to impose any limit.

In Committee, the Minister consistently refused to accept any maximum fine. She merely asserted that the fine had to be reasonable. It was alarming when the right hon. Lady responded to the debate on these matters in Committee. She said:

> I suppose that a serious contravention could attract a penalty of more than 10 per cent.

She gave some examples of when there might be a fine in excess of 10 per cent. of a company's annual turnover. She said that one example might be

> if there were instances of widespread, repeated and serious malpractice—doorstep selling tactics, perhaps.

Another example that she gave was

> the persistent failure to restore supplies after predictable power outages in winter.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 28 March 2000; c. 555-56.]

The fact that the Bill does not have an upper limit to the fines that can be imposed is not an inadvertent omission. The Minister has made it clear that such an outcome is intended, and that there may be circumstances where fines in excess of those that can be imposed under the provisions of the 1992 Act can be imposed under the Bill when it is enacted. That creates huge concern because the threat of fines of that magnitude hanging over the industry will cause particular problems. It creates an enormous regulatory risk. It creates also a fluctuating share price as attempts are made to try to assess the level of fine, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) so rightly said.

It is the regulatory risk that is the problem. Fines can be imposed regardless of whether the contravention of the licence conditions was deliberate or inadvertent. A fine can be imposed on a contravention that has already occurred but of which the utility company was unaware. Many of the licence conditions are subjective and widely framed. It is possible that a utility company could innocently be contravening a licence condition or a standards of performance requirement because it took a different interpretation of the wording from the regulatory authority.

Mr. Syms: Does my hon. Friend think that fines should be time limited? It is possible that contravention in the past may lead to multiple fines in future.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend makes another valid point. The Bill is not retrospective in the sense that any contravention that took place before it becomes law will not be considered. After that, and way into the future, any past transgression can be subject to a fine. The possibility

of a fine of the imposition that could bankrupt the company will cause investors to demand a higher rate of return. They will want to be compensated for taking a higher regulatory risk. That is not a theoretical consideration that has been dreamed up by Opposition Members. It is a genuine concern of which the Government must be aware, given all the briefings and representations that they have had from the companies. We are talking of severe fines that could bankrupt a company overnight. It is necessary to assess whether a fine is to be imposed if the risk is to be assessed. Given that that cannot be assessed, investors will require a higher rate of return to compensate them for the ever-present risk of a bankrupting fine being imposed.

That in turn will increase the companies' borrowing costs. They will face a higher interest charge. We are talking of companies that are highly capital intensive in terms of pipe works, pylons and wires. Even the supply companies have large capital investments in computer programmes and networks, which are all financed by borrowing. That results in high interest charges, which are passed on to the consumer. The CBI has said that

> over-stringent methods may increase regulatory risk, costing industry more in borrowing, and ultimately increasing the burden on the end consumer.

That is the key point. Extra costs will be passed on to the consumer, either in higher electricity and gas prices or in prices that will not fall by as much as they would have done otherwise. The limitless fining provisions are therefore a disaster for the consumer. They underline how deeply Ministers fail to understand how business works, free enterprise operates and the capital markets function.

The Government cannot keep hitting business with more and more regulation and more and heavier fines while using more anti-business language. Phrases such as "rip-off Britain" and "naming and shaming" have all been used by Ministers. Business cannot withstand such pressures for long without there being consequences. Those consequences always fall on the poor consumer; they do not fall on the big fat international capitalist that Ministers have in mind. Consumers suffer either because a company disappears, which reduces competition, or because the investors in the companies require higher returns.

Dr. Howells: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us why—perhaps he has given us the reason—after 18 years of Tory rule, the car companies used to refer to Britain as treasure island?

Mr. Gibb: I think that we should leave the issue of car pricing for another day.

Of course, the businesses that I have described are run by people who, like the rest of us, have human failings. They make mistakes and they will contravene licence conditions and standards of performance from time to time.

Mr. Ian Bruce: My hon. Friend has just been given an exact example of how the Government consider the electricity and gas companies to be a milch cow from which they can extract money. The point about the motor industry that the Minister was so keen to throw at my hon. Friend does not reflect the experience of the people in Ford or Rover who are about to lose their jobs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The amendment is quite tightly drawn and I would be grateful if the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) were not drawn away from it.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, the Minister's comment reveals the Government's misunderstanding of how business functions. They throw out phrases and cast out words and their remarks matter more than if they were uttered by other politicians or members of the public. When Ministers say such things, they cause severe damage.

The people who run businesses are human and they will fail from time to time. They will contravene licence conditions and standards of performance from time to time. Of course, regulations are needed to ensure that such transgressions are deterred in the utility sector and that they are kept to a minimum. However, the Government seek to extract the extra pound of flesh. The anti-business attitudes from the recesses of their old Labour heritage and instincts keep on re-emerging and they cause real damage to some of this country's most precious business assets.

Ministers fail to understand that the people who pay for those attitudes are not a mythical group of fat capitalists; the consumer always pays, just as it is always middle Britain that pays the Government's new stealth taxes. The average electricity and gas consumer will pay the cost of the extra-regulatory risk that the Bill and its penalty provisions will cause.

Amendments No. 26 and 27 would cap the level of the fine that the regulatory authority can impose. They suggest a cap of 5 per cent. of the annual turnover of the businesses concerned, but if the Government think that another figure is more appropriate, we may be able to support them. It is important that there is a cap of some sort. Without it, we shall damage the interests of the very consumers whom the Bill is meant to protect. I hope that the Government will, this time, respond to the debate far more constructively, so that the House can hear the arguments that were put in Committee about why the Government think that limitless fines on the utility companies are so vital. Such fines will undo all the potential good for the protection of the consumer that the Government purport to be doing. Those extra costs, arising from the higher regulatory risk, will have to be paid for by someone. That someone will be the consumer.

Mr. Syms: I know that we all want to make progress, so I shall be brief.

I support amendments Nos. 26 and 27. My hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) made compelling arguments that I hope that those on the Treasury Bench have listened to and concentrated on. The key point is that, in the capitalist system with limited companies and a corporate regime, it is important to be able to assess risk. If, as under clause 57, it is not possible to assess risk, there will be problems for companies, particularly those that are publicly quoted.

8.15 pm

Under the corporate regime, such businesses have to abide by certain rules and have to produce their accounts in a certain way. However, an arbitrary decision of the regulatory authority could lead to a devastating impact on a business. That business may have shareholders, among whom many may be pensioners, or it may be owned by pension funds. Employers in the business may have share options or they may look forward to bonuses. Therefore, amendment No. 26 would quantify the maximum penalty that an authority could levy against a business, so that risk could be quantified by those who make judgments in the market.

As the clause is drafted, there could be a regime of fines that are not time limited and a company could be caught for what it had done several years ago, and the fines could be multiple.

Dr. Howells: There is a time limit. The penalty must be imposed within 12 minutes—*[Interruption.]* It would be all right if it was within 12 minutes. The penalty must be imposed within 12 months of the offence taking place.

Mr. Syms: I thank the Minister for that explanation and for correcting me on that point.

However, there is a problem in that there could be multiple fines. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton pointed out, a limit of 10 per cent. applies to fines made under the Competition Act 1998, but there is no limit to the fines made under the Bill. It is important to set limits, so that people know how to react. It is perfectly possible for us in the Chamber to frame legislation on the basis that everyone is reasonable. However, unreasonable people sometimes operate reasonable legislation in an unreasonable way. That could disrupt the market and have a dire effect on a business, with consequences for those who invest in it and those who work for it.

The amendments are well worth considering. I hope that the Government will listen to the force of our arguments and accept them.

Mr. Ian Bruce: This is a crucial element in the Bill.

Mrs. Liddell: Sit down.

Mr. Bruce: The Minister picks me up immediately, but I think that this is a crucial part of the Bill, and that is the reason for the amendments.

Conservative Members have been concerned by the interventionist aspects of the Bill that will enable the Secretary of State to issue reams of regulations directing the regulator to have regard to a whole host of political imperatives and social policy aims that are more properly the role of government. We are concerned that the detail of these measures is not contained in the Bill and we have learned from past experience of this Government to be cautious of the detail that appears in secondary legislation. *[Interruption.]* The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs wants to know where my remarks come from. I have a speech writer; I use them occasionally to keep them in work. He will be pleased to know that there are many pages of this.

The Bill will give the Government a raft of new powers, such as those that will enable fuel poverty to be tackled and there to promote energy efficiency and the use of electricity from renewable resources. The regulators will have the power to impose tough fines on companies guilty of bad practice or poor performance, such as mis-selling, interruption to supplies and the time it takes to reconnect customers. There will be no upper limit on the fines that the regulators can impose.

On behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) tabled amendments Nos. 26 and 27, which would limit fines to 5 per cent. of the turnover of the licence holder. That is crucial because of the provisions of the Competition Act 1998, in which the Government argued there should be a limit. We believe that not only should the fines levied under this Bill be reasonable, but there should be certainty about the maximum amount.

Utility groups are wary about the extent to which the new powers allow public bodies to interfere in the affairs of the privatised utilities. The Electricity Association, to which I know the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs listens carefully, states:

> The Government is giving itself considerable new powers to direct regulation. We want to see these used judiciously and transparently, with proper consultation, avoiding regulatory shocks which have the effect of increasing uncertainty, which in turn leads to increased costs. However, ministers have acknowledged this, and we take heart from their declared commitment to regulatory stability.

The association said that before it had been consulted by Ministers. Having given that public warning, it believed privately that it would get from the Government the assurances that it wanted. Clearly, those assurances have not been made, and the association is concerned about that, as are Opposition Members.

The Times reports that competition experts have been shocked by the proposal for unlimited fines, stating:

> Competition experts were astounded the Bill imposes no limit on the fines the regulator could impose on companies. The regulator has carte blanche to determine a tariff of fines which he must publish and companies will have a right of appeal. But the failure to impose a limit means fines could exceed the maximum level under the Competition Act of 10 per cent. of turnover.

Although the water industry is no longer included in the Bill, it is significant that the outgoing Director General of Ofwat, Ian Wyatt, has criticised the Bill for its over-regulatory approach, saying:

> I find the bill over-complicated because it is over-prescriptive. Nothing is left to good sense.

Those words of condemnation come from a man who has been a regulator.

Dr. Howells: I have a great deal of time for Mr. Ian Byatt—his name is not Wyatt—because he has been a good regulator. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that we removed the water clauses from the Bill some time ago?

Mr. Bruce: The Minister knows very well that I am fully aware that the Government removed those clauses, but, despite all their powers, the Government and their spin doctors were incapable of silencing Ian Byatt. I am sure that the Minister would have been pleased if I had not read out the quotation of a long-standing regulator for whom the Minister has just expressed great respect. I hope that he will mark those words, and to make sure that he does so, I shall read them again. Mr. Byatt said:

> I find the bill over-complicated because it is over-prescriptive. Nothing is left to good sense.

That is as great a condemnation as we have heard of the Bill from any source. Ian Byatt is not playing a party political card; he is simply expressing his experience of being a regulator.

The powers to enable fuel poverty to be tackled and to promote energy efficiency and electricity from renewable sources and other such powers—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The amendments refer specifically to fixed penalties.

Mr. Bruce: This sentence will, when I have finished it, directly relate to that matter. All those powers are enforceable by virtue of the fines. The Minister for the Environment stated:

> The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will be able to require electricity supply companies to generate a proportion of electricity from renewable sources. This will be enforceable by the regulator using his general enforcement powers, including the power to impose monetary penalties.

As a person well versed in how legislation is introduced, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would be surprised to learn that such regulatory powers are backed by unlimited fines.

When trying to persuade companies to fulfil certain criteria by giving them incentives, we have never before backed that policy by having unlimited fines for companies that fail to meet those criteria. That is unreasonable. I understand why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you jumped to your feet, believing that the powers that I was describing could not be related to fines. That shows how ridiculous it is for the Government to enforce those powers by imposing fines.

Although the Government may sincerely believe that prescription achieves what might be described as socially desirable ends, the evidence would suggest that those ends can be achieved, and have been achieved, without prescription, through the very fact of competition in the utilities.

The amendments are sensible and simply seek to ensure that the Government will be reasonable in imposing the fines, as they have said they will be, and that the fines will be capped. The Minister may want to impose the 10 per cent. cap used in the Competition Act. We tabled several amendments about that in Committee, but when the Bill is on Report, we have to table a different amendment that has not been discussed in Committee. The exact level of the cap can be negotiated, perhaps in the other place.

We need certainty from the Government. Certainty is almost more important than the capping level itself because it will enable people to calculate the additional cost of regulation in working out financing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) pointed out, financing is an important issue. The Government might like to give way to the Opposition on this issue. We have all worked hard on the Bill, and we deserve to achieve the certainty for which the industry is asking.

Dr. Howells: I thank hon. Members for their contributions. We have heard interesting statements, but I do not include in that the rather patronising comments of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), who believes that he is the only person with insight into how business works. He was a tax adviser at one time, and tax advisers no doubt have their part to play in making the wheels of business turn.

The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) made a thoughtful contribution, as ever. Unlike the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, he recognises that companies that try to enter the gas and electricity markets understand very well that they must try to comply with licence requirements. If companies do not comply, they will face penalties; if they do comply, penalties will not apply. If they commit a breach, the penalty is limited to that which is reasonable in all the circumstances of the case. Companies can make a challenge through the courts if they believe that the penalty is not reasonable; the courts can quash unreasonable penalties, or substitute lesser penalties.

The picture painted by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton is one of companies quaking in terror at the thought of what might happen—that is how he sees the relationship between the industry and the Government, but it is not the picture that we see. As he said in Committee, he sometimes acts as the conduit for the views of the more paranoid sections of the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors—and he revels in that role.

The Government do not believe that the amendment will improve the Bill. As I pointed out in Committee, the most important protection for licensed utilities is that any penalty imposed must be reasonable in all the circumstances of the case. The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to quote me saying that.

Mr. Bruce: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: Yes—it is always a pleasure to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Bruce: The Minister is trying the soft-soap, soft-words approach. Our question is a simple one. In the recently passed Competition Act, the Government decided to set a limit on penalties of 10 per cent. of turnover. Why is it appropriate to have such a limit in that legislation, but not in this Bill?

8.30 pm

Dr. Howells: The simple answer is that the two were entirely different Bills and they will, I hope, be entirely different Acts. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, because he follows these matters attentively, the Competition Act was closely modelled on the European model, which sets a cap of 10 per cent. of turnover on the penalty that can be imposed. However, the Utilities Bill has different requirements.

The authority will have to produce and consult on a statement of policy on the imposition of penalties and it must have regard to that statement when imposing a penalty. The authority will have to take certain steps, including holding public consultation, before finalising the imposition of a penalty. The company concerned will be able to challenge in the courts both the imposition and the amount of any penalty, as well as the payment schedule determined by the authority. The amendment would introduce a further limitation on those powers, by specifically limiting to 5 per cent. of turnover any penalty imposed. As the hon. Member for South Dorset says, that would not even align the maximum penalty with the limit

[Dr. Howells]

under the Competition Act, which is set at 10 per cent. of turnover—the figure that appeared in the Opposition's amendment tabled in Committee.

In some cases, a penalty of 5 per cent. of turnover or less might be reasonable, when all of the circumstances of the case have been taken into account. However, in cases involving more serious contraventions, such a penalty might not be appropriate. In proposing a maximum penalty of 5 per cent. of turnover, do the Opposition intend to prevent the authority from imposing a penalty that is reasonable in all the circumstances of a case in which a penalty of more than 5 per cent. of turnover would be reasonable? Are they saying that, in no circumstances—even if price fixing and other serious market distortions have resulted in millions of consumers being ripped off—should companies be fined more than 5 per cent. of turnover?

Why do the Conservatives do such things? I know that they loathe the very idea of a regulator having the power to do anything other than slap a company's wrists. Indeed, that was all that regulators could do until we passed the Competition Act. If the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton believes that serious market distortions occur from time to time—cartels are formed, price-fixing arrangements made, complex monopolies operated—surely he accepts that the regulators should have more power to step in. Regulators should be able to warn companies at first, if necessary; then, in cases of serious breach, they should be able to hit the companies extremely hard with a fine that will ensure that such a breach never occurs again.

Mr. Gibb: The Minister has raised two points. First, there is no warning: that is what happened under the regulatory regime that is being replaced. Now, fines can be imposed for past transgressions, with no warning—the fact of their having happened will be sufficient justification, regardless of whether they were deliberate, inadvertent or the result of negligence. Secondly, I should be happy to listen to any proposal for a limit other than 5 per cent. Our amendment in Committee proposed a 10 per cent. limit; we proposed 5 per cent. so that the issue could be debated again on Report. If the Minister has some other figure, we shall listen. The point is, we need a limit—it is the lack of a limit that creates a regulatory risk.

Dr. Howells: The proposed limit was 10 per cent. in Committee, it is 5 per cent. on Report, and it could be 2.5 per cent. tomorrow. The point is that, for the reasons that I have given, the Government will not set a limit. We believe that a limit could impose serious constraint on the effectiveness of the powers of regulators, and that would be at odds with the Government's objective of protecting the interests of consumers. Furthermore, the Government believe that a limit is unnecessary.

The Government consider that the financial penalty provisions give a real measure of protection to consumers and the companies concerned, and that they will provide genuine benefits for consumers and for companies that strive to adhere to their obligations rather than taking short cuts. The amendments would undermine that.

I urge the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton to withdraw the amendment and not to press the other amendment. Should he seek to divide the House, I urge hon. Members to vote against the amendment.

Mr. Gibb *rose—*

Dr. Howells: Disappointing.

Mr. Gibb: It was an outrageous rather than a disappointing response.

Industry and others wish to see many of the Bill's provisions on the statute book as soon as possible—for example, NETA and the separation of distribution and electricity supply—but the penalties to be imposed on industry for contravening licence conditions and for failing to perform to the standards required in the Bill alarm industry.

The Minister says that companies have to understand that they must comply with the licence conditions, but they do understand that. Those companies are run by people who want to obey the conditions to which they have signed up. They want to meet the conditions relating to standards of performance and to provide a good service to their customers, but there will be inadvertent transgressions. The Bill, in contrast to the current regulatory regime, makes no allowance for inadvertent transgressions. Any transgression—inadvertent, deliberate or otherwise—will be covered and will give rise to a penalty. That is the difference between this regulatory regime and the current one. There is no chance of companies being able to put matters right. Having tried to put things right, they will still be subject to a fine, which could be sufficient to wipe out the company because there is no limit in the Bill.

The Minister says that the amendments are at odds with the objective of protecting the consumer, but I am afraid that the limitless fine provisions are at odds with the objective of protecting the consumer. If a fine is imposed, it will ultimately be borne by the consumer. All moneys paid out by companies will ultimately be paid by the consumer.

The increased regulatory risk caused by the limitless fine will increase the cost of capital to companies, which again will be passed on to the consumer. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that the Minister finds some of my responses patronising. They are not meant to be. I know that the Minister is having a go at me today, but the fact remains that both Ministers demonstrate a lack of understanding of how business works. I say that not because I know anything about their education, experience or background, but because of what they are saying about the Bill and the way in which they are trying to justify the provisions. They fail to understand the consequences of the measures that they propose. Describing elements of the CBI and the IOD as paranoid will not go down well with them.

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman distorts my words. I said that he likes to paint himself as a conduit for the most paranoid sections of the CBI.

Mr. Gibb: As I said in Committee, I would be a conduit for anybody with whose representations I agree, whether they be consumer groups, business groups or

individual constituents. I shall continue to do that despite the Minister's criticism, because that is what we are here to do. Our task is to deliver the views of all sections of society in the House, particularly those that are affected by the Bill. British consumers will be enormously damaged by the Bill, which will add enormously to the costs that industry will have to pick up and then pass on to the consumer.

It is staggering how many times Opposition Members have to repeat that measures that add to industry's costs—whether in higher regulatory risk, higher interest charges or costs incurred in having to comply with guidance issued by the Secretary of State—will ultimately be paid for by the consumer. That reveals a lack of understanding about how industry works. It is a pity that, as a consequence of the Bill, customers will not benefit from the falls in electricity and gas prices to which they would otherwise be entitled.

We have debated the amendment sufficiently. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 60

OBLIGATION IN CONNECTION WITH ELECTRICITY FROM RENEWABLE SOURCES

Amendment proposed: No. 3, in page 60, leave out lines 37 to 40.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 260, Noes 30.

Division No. 173] **[8.40 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*

Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Mrs. Anne McGuire.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Burnett, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Kirkwood, Archy
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and Mr. David Heath.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 4, in page 104, line 1, leave out Clauses 100 to 105.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Motion to transfer clause 107, agreed to.

Clause 108

ELECTRICITY LICENCE CONDITIONS

Amendment made: No. 6, in page 111, line 33, leave out from beginning of line to end of line 10 on page 112 and insert—

'After section 14 of the 1989 Act (modification following report) there is inserted–'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Motion to transfer clause 108, agreed to.

Clause 109

EXTENT OF PART III

Amendment made: No. 8, in page 114, line 7, leave out Clause 109.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 110

FINANCIAL PROVISIONS

Amendment made: No. 9, in page 114, line 14, leave out from "the" to "by" in line 15 and insert "Authority".—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 113

SHORT TITLE AND COMMENCEMENT

Amendment made: No. 10, in page 114, line 39, at end insert—

'(3) Any amendment or repeal made by this Act has the same extent as the enactment being amended or repealed.

(4) Subject to subsection (3), this Act does not extend to Northern Ireland.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Schedule 2

THE GAS AND ELECTRICITY CONSUMER COUNCIL

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): I beg to move amendment No. 39, in page 117, line 28, at end insert—

'(2A) The Council shall maintain staff in each region for which there is a Government Office for the Regions.'.

Schedule 2 provides for the establishment of the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council. The amendment would ensure that staff of the council would be available in each region. The proposals on which consultation is taking place through the shadow Gas and Electricity Consumer Council are causing considerable concern in the north-east of England. I guess that they will cause similar concern elsewhere when the details become clear.

The proposals provide two alternatives: the physical presence of staff of the new Gas and Electricity Consumer Council in either three or five places in mainland United Kingdom. That availability of professional staff is not sufficient to deal with the problems and complaints of consumers. It will give rise to considerable difficulty, and will not provide the service that the Government intend the new council to offer.

A particular feature of both proposals on the table for consultation gives rise to concern in the north-east. Either all the north-east, in one case, or part of it, in the other, would be served from Scotland. Given your presence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that of my right hon. Friend the Minister, I hesitate to quibble about that, but the experiment has already been tried, and has failed. During the 1990s, British Gas attempted to operate both its customer accounts services and its technical repair servicing in the north-east of England from Scotland. The system did not work, and had to be reversed. That is why there is concern about this proposal.

There is also concern because the consumer councils in the north-east are dealing with a staggeringly large percentage of the total volume of complaints. In 1999, half the complaints to the Gas Consumers Council went to the council in the north-east of England. That is not surprising, because the north-east of England contains the greatest concentration of people with pre-payment meters and budget payment plans. Those are the two factors that most often give rise to consumer complaints. Moreover, it was the north-east that experienced the first "hit" of consumer problems with the dual fuel provisions, which were piloted there by Northern Electric. Those provisions gave rise to a huge volume of consumer complaints.

The lack of professional staff with expertise to help consumers with their problems will cause considerable difficulty in the north-east. The age of welfare dependency is coming to an end: consumers want a voice for themselves, although they frequently require

professional assistance and back-up. They do not passively accept the failures in service, difficulties with charging and problems with service delivery that were accepted without complaint in the past. I hope that the Government will take seriously the need for professional staff to be available to deal with consumer complaints in every region of England.

Mrs. Liddell: I well understand the reasons for the amendment. It is important for consumers' views to be taken into account, wherever those consumers may be. The amendment would insert in the Bill a requirement for the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council to maintain staff in each region for which there is a Government office. That would not necessarily comply with the structure of the energy industries, and might result in a disjointed arrangement in terms of the location of companies. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins), who is anxious to ensure that the voice of consumers is heard, to pause and consider whether the degree of prescription that he suggests is necessary or appropriate.

Our general approach on organisational issues is to give the council a clear set of functions, but also to give it the flexibility that will allow it to organise itself in the way that it considers best suited to the fulfilling of those functions. Ours is an arm's-length approach, and it strikes us as the right one. If an organisation is given a job for which it will be accountable, it makes sense to enable it to organise itself cost-effectively.

The idea of a staff presence in each region might be attractive in the short term, but it would not necessarily be attractive in the longer term as the nature of the industry changed. Increasingly—especially now that gas and electricity can be offered by the same company—companies are centred in different regional capitals, serving industry and consumers from those regional bases.

9 pm

Consumers' needs and requirements may change, just as the industry changes; the structure of the gas and electricity industry may change further. The Bill ensures that there is the necessary flexibility to allow those changes to be taken into account.

It is more important for the Bill to get the functions of the council—the outputs, if you like—right than to prescribe in detail how they should be delivered, but I recognise how important it is to ensure that regional issues are taken into account. For example, the chairman of the Gas Consumers Council, who will become the chairman of the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council, has recently consulted on that organisational structure. She will come back with a final set of proposals following the consultation. I have said to her that it is important that she considers the outputs.

My hon. Friend may care to reflect on whether regional needs could be met by the establishment of regional panels, as distinct from regional offices. Many issues will be raised, including that of pre-payment meters, which is of considerable importance in my constituency because of the socio-economic mix of the people there. We may not need the office to have a specific regional focus, provided that a regional perspective is used in dealing with complaints.

I am anxious to ensure that when the chairman makes her proposals, she includes mechanisms to ensure that the views of consumers throughout the country are taken into account. However, I have grave doubts about whether an extensive office network based on the Government office areas is the most cost-effective way to do that. There is no such overlap between Government office boundaries and the gas and electricity companies. Many consumer issues will have a national perspective. For instance, one of the issues that we have discussed a lot during consideration of the Bill is doorstep mis-selling. That is happening throughout the country and we are all anxious about it, so I ask my hon. Friend to consider the case that I have made.

Mr. Cousins: I do not want to detain us for long, but I seek an assurance from my right hon. Friend that she intends consumers in each region to have ready access—at no cost, or minimal cost—to the sort of professional back-up that the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council is being set up to deliver for people with complaints and anxiety about quality of service.

Mrs. Liddell: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I hope that, having been given it, he will be prepared to consider withdrawing his amendment.

Mr. Cousins: I am happy to beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 3

FURTHER PROVISION ABOUT TRANSFERS OF FUNCTIONS, PROPERTY ETC..

Amendments made: No. 11, in page 120, leave out lines 1 to 3.

No. 12, in page 120, line 4, leave out from "liabilities" to "and" in line 5 and insert "under section 3".

No. 13, in page 120, line 6, leave out "or 103(3)".

No. 14, in page 120, line 44, leave out from first "the" to "under" in line 45 and insert "Council".—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Schedule 6

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendment made: No. 15, in page 125, leave out lines 29 to 38.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Schedule 8

REPEALS

Amendments made: No. 16, in page 133, line 21, column 3, leave out—

'the Director General of Telecommunications'.

No. 17, in page 133, line 36, column 3, leave out—

'the Director General of Telecommunications'.

No. 18, in page 133, line 44, column 3, leave out—

'the Director General of Telecommunications'.

No. 19, in page 134, leave out lines 5 to 18.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Title

UTILITIES

Amendments made: No. 20, in title, line 2, leave out from " Authority" to "to" in line 4 and insert—

'and the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council'.

No. 21, in title, line 5, leave out "telecommunications,".—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

9.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am sure that all Members would like to thank those who served so ably on the Standing Committee of the Bill, giving detailed scrutiny to the various measures—providing the House with the opportunity on Report to consider a Bill to which the Standing Committee had given due consideration. Special thanks must go to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood), who chaired the proceedings of the Standing Committee. On behalf of all Members, we would like to thank them for doing so.

The Utilities Bill forms part of the Government's agenda of modernisation and reform. It makes important reforms to the regulation of the gas and electricity industries.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): There is no doubt that this is a good Bill. It does, however, for the first time, extend some of the regulator's powers to the offshore sector of the oil and gas industry. There is some concern in the industry that there should be a requirement on the regulator to consult the industry, particularly on proposals that may affect competitiveness and, ultimately, consumers. Clause 4(4) imposes a general requirement on the regulator to consult. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that provision includes consultation on matters relating to the offshore oil and gas industry?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner for the interests of the offshore oil and gas industry, and I understand his concerns that the Bill's consultation provision does not refer explicitly to the offshore oil and gas industry. However, I reassure him that the consultation that will have to occur extends to the offshore oil and gas industry. I hope that that goes some way towards meeting his concerns.

The Utilities Bill puts consumers at the heart of regulation. The Bill's aim is to deliver a modern, efficient and fair framework, reflecting the growing convergence of the two sectors. It provides a consistent, accountable and transparent regime that will help to reduce costs for both gas and electricity. Consequently, it will deliver real lower prices for both domestic or business consumers.

The Bill will provide more effective competition in the gas and electricity market. Conservative Members' approach to utilities was to privatise them quickly, selling national assets—as has been found in various reports by the National Audit Office—at a knock-down price and without any real concern for the structure of the industry that was left behind. No real consideration was given to the needs of consumers or to whether they received a good and fair deal because of the changes. A regulation system was introduced that created a climate of uncertainty and failed to deliver effective competition. The system was inherently unstable. The Government felt that it was important to introduce a Utilities Bill to remedy all the wrongs caused by the Conservatives' approach to the utilities sector.

The Bill introduces new electricity trading arrangements, which we are confident will produce reductions in wholesale electricity prices of at least 10 per cent. and form an important part of the energy statement that I made earlier this week. It will merge the gas and electricity regulators, to reflect the rapid convergence of those two markets. It will establish a single and stronger consumer council, which is better able to advocate consumers' interests, and it will put consumers first. For the first time, the regulator will have a principal objective of protecting the consumer interest.

We want the regulator to examine particularly the needs of those who are on a low income, of pensioners and of consumers in rural areas. I hope that that approach will be supported by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

The Bill introduces a power for the authority to impose financial penalties for past and continuing breaches of licence conditions and other obligations. It contains reserve powers to protect and assist disadvantaged consumers. It sets targets for energy efficiency.

The Utilities Bill provides many changes that will be of real and lasting benefit to consumers, both domestic and business. It reflects a new approach to the utilities sector. Real improvements will be delivered. It is a Bill that meets our objectives of modernisation and reform, and I commend it to the House.

9.9 pm

Mrs. Browning: The Utilities Bill has been a shambles. It is rare indeed for the debate on a Bill's remaining stages to begin with a motion to recommit it to Committee, but it is unprecedented for half the major provisions of a Government Bill to be removed, nine sittings into its Committee stage, because of issues that were quite clearly foreseeable before the Bill was published.

Telecoms were removed because of the communication White Paper to be published in the autumn. DTI Ministers must have known about that—or perhaps they did not. One begins to wonder what is going on at the DTI and whether Ministers are focused on policy development.

Water was also removed—in this case because later this year DETR is to publish its own water Bill. We still have not discovered whether DTI Ministers knew about that when they included water in the Utilities Bill.

On Second Reading it was clear that the Bill required several hundred drafting amendments. One reason given for that was that the parliamentary draftsman responsible had been ill in the weeks before Second Reading. The Utilities Bill was supposed to be one of the Government's flagship Bills, but they introduced it regardless of whether or not the preparation had been completed. If that was the case, why is it that, even as late as mid-April, the Government are still tabling amendments and new clauses, some of which came to the Committee directly from the draftsman's pen?

The Bill has been unprecedented in its incompetence in respect of policy, drafting and delivery, but it is hugely important in what it will ultimately achieve.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am sure that my hon. Friend will have heard the Secretary of State say that the Bill cures the utilities of all the problems that were left by the Conservative Government—when he has already taken two of the utilities out of the Bill. Clearly, he has produced a dog's dinner rather than a cure.

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend, who served on the Committee, is absolutely right. Perhaps this is the appropriate moment for me to pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friends did in Committee, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) and for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce).

On the plus side, in clause 66 the Bill paves the way for new electricity trading arrangements, which we and industry welcome. Nearly £750 million is being spent on developing the new electricity market that the Government expect and that we all hope will deliver lower electricity prices.

The Bill merges the electricity and gas regulators into a new combined Ofgem. That is also welcome as it makes sense for those industries to be jointly regulated since they have started to supply each others' products. However, large bureaucracies tend to grow even larger, so it is a pity that the Government failed in Committee to accept our amendments that would have restricted the spending of Ofgem to rises of no more than the rate of inflation.

We welcome the new combined Gas and Electricity Consumer Council. The Bill also separates the licensing of the distribution and supply of electricity. We welcome that too, as it further defines and confines the area that remains a natural monopoly. That should mean that there is scope to reduce regulatory involvement in due course in those areas that are fully open to competition, but it is clear from the Bill that regulation is to have new and expanded objectives that will make it increasingly difficult for regulation to recede as competition increases.

I now turn to the minuses in the Bill. It creates a new range of objectives for the Secretary of State and for the new regulatory authority to impose on the gas and electricity utilities. No longer is the regulator's role simply to mimic competition where natural monopoly prevails. Now its role is to deliver the Government's social and environmental objectives. However worth while those objectives may be, it is for the Government to implement them through Government programmes and not to burden business with their delivery. As a result of the imposition of new and ever more costly demands on gas and electricity suppliers, the costs will inevitably be passed on to the consumer in their gas and electricity bills—something that the Secretary of State should bear in mind when he so readily proclaims this to be a Bill for consumers. The Government's social program, rather than being financed through taxation, which is levied according to income, will now be funded through household bills, which are paid according to usage. So large families and the elderly will pay for the Government's social and environmental programmes.

Also on the minus side are the limitless fines that the Bill will enable the regulatory authority to impose on the utilities, as we discussed again this evening. Not even the Competition Act 1998, with its draconian fines of up to 10 per cent. of turnover, can match the Utilities Bill in its scope for high fines. The Secretary of State should remember that corporate fines often find their way back into the pricing mechanism for consumers. The consequence will be a huge increase in the level of regulatory risk being faced by the industry. Higher regulatory risk means higher rewards for the provider of capital to the industry to compensate for the increased risk. That in turn translates into higher interest costs, which inevitably end up being passed on to the consumer.

The Bill has been trumpeted as shifting the balance in the utilities away from the shareholder to the consumer. The reality is that the consumer will pick up the tab. Privatisation of electricity and gas, opposed by Labour and predicted by the Prime Minister as leading to higher prices, has delivered huge cuts in the cost of electricity and gas to the consumer: they are now 30 per cent. cheaper in real terms. Competition has delivered the savings and the Bill demotes the promotion of competition to a second order objective.

The Bill will replace the promotion of competition with the promotion of yet more regulation. It reflects the Government's attitude that business is generally up to no good and that only the benign hand of increased intervention and regulation can remedy that. Reference has been made again tonight to fat cats, which reminds us that it was the Secretary of State who ran the so-called fat cat unit at Millbank towers.

We are seeing a new form of government intervention. It is quintessentially the third way—it invites a more powerful, more expensive and more interventionist regulator to second-guess management decisions and impose on industry new burdens to deliver the Government's social programme, while distancing Ministers from any controversy over the issues concerned. How familiar we are with this Secretary of State seeking to distance himself from any controversy emanating from his Department! The Bill will hamper competition, add to costs and, most deplorably of all, damage, not protect, the interests of consumers.

9.18 pm

Mr. Stunell: First, I wish to thank the ministerial team for the work that they have put into the Bill. It has had the most remarkably chequered history and I am well aware that—as well as causing us stress—it has caused the ministerial team some stress. Occasionally, that has been visible, despite their smiling attempts to deny it. When I saw the list of amendments for Report, I derived some wry amusement from realising that, despite the 50-odd clauses we had successfully deleted in Committee, a few had escaped Ministers' eagle eyes and had to be deleted today. I recognise what a difficult and hard job they have had.

The overall shape of the Bill is now right and it should proceed, but it still has significant faults. We have tried to demonstrate those faults, in Committee and on Report, and to indicate how they might have been rectified. I hope that there will be opportunities to do that in the other place.

I would highlight the fact that, despite the many good intentions and smooth words and the emollient approach of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs in Committee, there are no firm targets for delivery on

[Mr. Stunell]

renewables. That is a worry, and it raises fears in the industry that one of the fundamental tasks of the Department of Trade and Industry will not be achieved. That task is to make sure that the potential for employment, export and growth in the renewables sector is fully developed.

We believe that an opportunity that could have allowed the renewables sector to blossom and grow, as has happened in some neighbouring countries has been missed. As a result, the United Kingdom will miss out on some growth and export opportunities, as well as on the opportunity to reach the Kyoto targets that the Government have pledged to achieve.

We are worried about some of the matters relating to the consumer council in its new combined form. The council is the way to go, but we think that it may turn out to be too centralised and bureaucratic, and we are worried about the availability of information to it. It would be only too easy for the regulator and the industry to shut up shop and keep information away from the council.

Ministers have given reassurances on the record that I hope can be prayed in aid when information is denied. However, we would have preferred the requirements to protect the consumer and to make information available to be specified on the face of the Bill.

Our underlying belief is that, although it is right and proper for the Bill to do all that it can to open up competition in the gas and electricity industries, at every level from generator to supplier, making the market the determining force for the introduction of renewables and the achievement of environmental targets will not work. We also doubt that the market will be the right force to achieve the Government's social objectives. The Bill has some weak links that the Government will have to address, either in Parliament or in some other way, in the very near future.

The Bill has some very positive features, however. We have welcomed the new electricity trading arrangements and the increased competition that will be introduced to the gas and electricity markets. We also welcome the integrated regulatory framework that will be provided in the future. In the past, there has been inconsistency between regulators and, on some occasions, the regulatory framework has fostered a jobsworth attitude. I hope that the Bill will put an end to that.

We are happy with the environmental obligations in the Bill. They are a positive step forward and we are pleased to support them.

Overall, the Bill takes a number of significant steps forward, but it falters in some key areas. We regret that, and hope that opportunities for further improvements will be taken.

We shall support the Bill tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

PETITION

Fertility Treatment

9.23 pm

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I am pleased to present a petition signed by 1,176 local people on the sensitive and sometimes heartbreaking issue of gaining equal access to fertility treatment.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons, this petition of Shropshire and mid-Wales residents declares

That with one in six couples seeking help for infertility at some time, there is an overwhelming need for better funding for this treatment on the NHS, the current provision of which is patchwork across Britain and very minimal in Shropshire and mid-Wales.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State to ensure that adequate resources are available for infertility treatment and that access to this treatment should be on a fair and equitable basis across the country.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

To lie upon the Table.

Macular Eye Disease

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

9.24 pm

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the subject of macular eye disease and so, I hope, to increase awareness of a debilitating disease that is the most common form of registrable visual impairment among the elderly in the western world. Age-related macular degeneration affects 40 per cent. of people aged over 75, despite which it is relatively unheard of.

I first became aware of the problems associated with the disease when I was invited to attend a newly formed macular eye disease group in my constituency. Bolton macular disease group is a self-help organisation comprising people with a common aim of providing support for each other and discussing problems and exchanging ideas on how to cope with their difficulties. The group was formed with the help of the Bolton social services department's visual impairment team, which had done good work for those who suffer from impaired vision.

It is all too fashionable these days to criticise social services departments, and it is a pleasure to highlight the essential work that they do and to congratulate them on it. I pay tribute to the macular group in Bolton and similar groups around the country. They do a tremendous voluntary job in helping sufferers and their partners with advice and support. Most importantly, they reassure people who have the disease that they are not alone. The Bolton group is part of the national Macular Disease Society, which has many branches across the country.

To assist those who are unaware of the problems of macular degeneration, I shall briefly describe the disease. The human eye operates like a camera, the main difference being that a camera has a layer of film in the back while the eye has a layer of tissue—the retina. The image focused on the retina is converted to a digital image that is transmitted through the optic nerve to the brain, where it is perceived as sharply focused vision. The macula is found at the centre of the retina, where incoming rays of light are focused. The macula is responsible for what we see immediately in front of us—the vision that we need for detailed reading or writing. It controls our ability to appreciate colour.

The macula receives most of its nourishment from blood vessels in a deeper layer, which is separated from the macula by a membrane. If the membrane is damaged, the macula does not function properly. If the membrane breaks, new and abnormal blood vessels form to try to repair the damage, but they may bleed and displace the macula. The delicate cells of the macula can sometimes become damaged and stop working. No one seems to know why, but it tends to happen as we get older, although children and young people may also suffer from inherited macular degeneration: indeed, sometimes, several members of a family will suffer.

Macular degeneration impairs your ability to look straight ahead, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is a blind spot in the centre of your vision. It is always there; it never goes away. It is as if someone were holding a coin six inches in front of your face. You cannot see around the spot, and it will not move away from the centre of vision, regardless of where you look.

Because macular degeneration is normally age-related, it usually involves both eyes, although not necessarily at the same time. For many people, the visual cells simply cease to function, just as the colours fade in an old photograph: that is known as dry degeneration. Fortunately, it is not a painful disease and it never leads to complete blindness, even though it is the most common cause of poor sight in people aged over-60. It never leads to complete loss of sight because only the central vision is affected, so those with macular degeneration will have enough side vision to get about and to maintain their independence. Dry degeneration accounts for the majority of cases; in effect, it is untreatable.

A significant minority of cases are of wet macular degeneration, which is much more severe. However, it is treatable if diagnosed early enough. AMD Alliance International estimates that more than 500,000 people in the UK suffer from various forms of the disease. Between 10 and 15 per cent. of those patients have wet AMD, but they can be treated if the disease is caught early enough.

Every year, throughout the world, 500,000 new patients develop wet AMD; between 40 and 60 per cent. of sufferers will develop the lesions that are the predominant sign of the disease. Patients with that condition lose their ability to read, drive and recognise faces in as little as two months or as long as two years.

Because wet AMD can cause profound and rapid loss of vision, it has been the subject of many years of research by scientists and clinicians throughout the world, and various new treatments have been promoted. New developments are upon us. Only last week, the United States Food and Drug Administration approved an exciting new treatment, and the European Union recommended approval of a treatment involving a combination of laser beams and the drug Visudyne.

Two centres in the UK—Liverpool and Aberdeen—have been taking part in international studies to evaluate photodynamic therapy, which is a new treatment for wet AMD. Last month, the brief results of the second year of the study were released. They demonstrated that the beneficial effects of photodynamic therapy had continued into the second year.

The therapy works by preventing the leaking blood vessels from causing further damage. The procedure takes place in an out-patient clinic and takes about 30 minutes. It starts with a 10-minute intravenous infusion of Visudyne—a light-sensitive dye that sticks to the inner lining of the new vessels. Five minutes after the infusion, the dye is activated by a light shone on to the surface of the eye. The activated dye then damages the vessels, causing them to close.

I should warn hon. Members that photodynamic therapy is beneficial only for certain categories of the disease and that treatment needs to be commenced within six months of the onset of visual deterioration. That is why it is so important to highlight the disease and to encourage awareness and early diagnosis. Of course, Visudyne offers a solution for only a small minority of those with AMD; a much larger majority of sufferers will continue to depend on visual aids, equipment and conventional treatment.

[Mr. David Crausby]

The normal first port of call for those who are experiencing problems with their vision is their optician. The introduction of free eye tests for the elderly from the beginning of this month is of immense importance in the early diagnosis of AMD. Regrettably, far too many elderly people simply could not afford to attend their optician regularly and they could have missed out on early treatment and support.

I am optimistic that regular eye testing will be most helpful in ensuring that people aged over 60 who are at risk of AMD will be able to receive regular eye examinations. The Royal National Institute for the Blind recommends that elderly people should have an eye test every two years. More frequent examinations will obviously result in patients with signs of eye disease being referred for the specialist treatment that they require.

I am concerned, however, that the standard of service from opticians is irregular. I am advised that they do not always effectively test for the disease. A standard optical test involves external examination and internal examination of the eye to detect signs of injury, abnormality or disease, and examination of the retina. The use of an ophthalmoscope would be expected to uncover macular degeneration when it is well established. There is, however, a test known as the Amsler grid, which is designed to map the field of vision and uncover any problems, but there is no requirement for an optician to use this test routinely. I would appreciate it if my hon. Friend the Minister were to investigate the situation.

The second port of call for those experiencing a visual difficulty is usually their general practitioner. They, like opticians, have to decide whether a referral to a consultant is appropriate. This can cause problems with people missing out if the GP is insufficiently trained in recognising when it is necessary to refer a patient to an eye consultant.

It is only when patients see an eye consultant that treatment becomes available, and it is by this time often too late effectively to treat the disease. There is still much that can be done, however, even when vision has deteriorated either through wet or dry degeneration. For example, the patient may be registered as blind or partially sighted, and only the consultant has the authority to make the registration decision. Registration automatically leads to referral to the local social services department, which will instigate action from its visual impairment team or its local equivalent.

If the consultant feels that the patient would benefit from the use of magnifiers or aids of any sort, a referral would be made to the low-vision aid clinic, which is usually part of the same hospital. That clinic will recognise that one of the main difficulties for a patient with AMD will be reading and examining small detail. The clinics are able to measure close as well as distance vision, and can prescribe magnifiers to assist with close work. The optometrist will also advise on the importance of correct lighting levels to enhance the patient's remaining vision.

In addition, virtually all social services departments will have a provision for visually impaired people. Their role is to assist these people in retaining their independence and quality of life. Social services will conduct an initial assessment of the individual's needs.

These days there are numerous aids and pieces of equipment for reading, writing, mobility and general daily life. They include closed circuit television, talking books, magazines and newspapers, big-button telephones, talking watches and clocks, tactile oven controls and even talking microwaves. There are clubs and societies such as the Macular Disease Society, which do such good work in Bolton and which first made me aware of this disabling disease.

My aim in initiating this debate on macular eye disease was to raise awareness of a disability that is so little known and yet affects so many people. I am eager to enlist the Government's support in highlighting and improving the services that are available to sufferers.

As I have said, there are some exciting treatments on the horizon, but the harsh reality is that for the vast majority it is too late to cure the disease. It is not too late, however, to provide modern visual aids. With such rapid strides being made in new technology, there will no doubt be many more exciting prospects available on the horizon.

9.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby) on securing the time for this debate. I hardly need say that sight, and the risk of losing it, is an important subject. Age-related macular degeneration—or AMD—affects about 500,000 people in the United Kingdom, mainly, but not exclusively, the elderly.

Before I enlarge a little on what my hon. Friend has told us about the origins and effects of AMD, I join him in paying tribute to the voluntary organisation that he mentioned in his constituency. The national health service owes much to support given by interest groups that are often formed by the sufferers of particular diseases. Therefore, I extend my appreciation to the work of the Bolton Macular Disease Society.

I shall say a little about the Government's position on possible advances in the treatment of AMD. We have already demonstrated the priority that the Government attach to the eye care of the elderly by the reintroduction of free sight tests for everyone aged 60 or over, but we need to make sure that the national health service stays sensitive to new advances in the treatment of eye disease and can quickly identify the people who might benefit from them.

AMD is the most common cause of sight loss in people over 60. Although it is severely disabling—my hon. Friend described the condition graphically—it seldom leads to complete sight loss because only the central vision is affected. That means that most people with macular degeneration should have enough side vision to maintain a degree of mobility and independence.

I know that some concerns have been expressed that AMD is becoming more common among younger or middle-aged people. In fact, we have always known that people in their 40s contract this condition—congenital sight defects, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and AMD each account for about 10 per cent. of people registered blind under the age of 64. However, we are not aware of those figures changing significantly. AMD in particular, and loss of sight more generally, remain in most cases diseases of old age. Out of 300,000 people registered blind or partially sighted, two thirds are over the age of 75.

As macular degeneration is an age-related process, it often involves both eyes, although they may not be affected at the same time. Some people find that their visual cells simply stop working, with an effect—as my hon. Friend described it—a bit like the colours fading in an old photograph. That is known as "dry" degeneration. The dry type is the more common form—we estimate that it affects almost 90 per cent. of those with AMD. The onset of this condition tends to be slow and both eyes are usually affected symmetrically.

Vision tends to deteriorate gradually and the loss is not always severe. Unfortunately, there is not yet a proven treatment for the condition, but the worst effects can be alleviated with low vision aids such as magnifiers, telescopes and, increasingly, closed circuit television cameras that project an enlarged image on a display in front of the patient's eyes. Better lighting and large-print books can also be helpful.

The other type of macular degeneration is known as wet degeneration. It is less common—we estimate that it affects about 10 per cent. of patients with AMD—but it tends to have a more severe and rapid effect on the central area of vision. Blood vessels from one layer at the back of the eye grow in an abnormal fashion into the macular area. These blood vessels may leak or bleed causing a rapid and significant reduction in central vision. That tends to affect one eye at a time, but there is a risk of the same thing occurring in the other eye over the following months.

About 10 per cent. of people with wet AMD—in other words only a very small proportion of all AMD sufferers—might be suitable candidates for laser treatment. It is normally successful only if the condition is picked up early, and even then not all patients are suitable. Unfortunately, with laser treatment there is also the risk that lesions may continue to progress and that vision may become even worse after the treatment.

I am happy to say that, as my hon. Friend suggested, research is under way into a process that offers exciting prospects of increasing the accuracy and effectiveness of laser treatment. The treatment is known as photodynamic therapy and involves the use of a photosensitive dye, which, when activated in the back of the eye by a light source, closes abnormal retina blood vessels. The underlying abnormal blood vessels should then be easily identified and selectively destroyed without damaging the overlying sensory retina.

That research project, which is being conducted at the St. Paul's eye unit in Liverpool, is due to take two years and is now in its second year. As my hon. Friend said, the results so far are promising, but the key test will be whether the treatment offers real and, above all, lasting improvements to the patient's sight.

If, as we all hope, the outcome of the research is positive, we will, as my hon. Friend has emphasised, need to consider carefully whether that means that laser treatment could be provided more widely than it is now. How that consideration should best be done depends in part on the exact outcome of the research. The Government have established a new process for evaluating developments in medical science, and one option would be to ask the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to evaluate the new treatment. Whatever the process for evaluating the research, I can assure my hon. Friend that it will be as quick and as thorough as it needs to be for the welfare of AMD patients and the NHS as a whole.

I would not want to leave my hon. Friend or the House with the impression that the photodynamic project is the only research into AMD. There are no fewer than 19 projects looking at AMD and another 47 which have considered promising options such as sub-macular surgery have recently been completed. I sincerely hope that some of that research leads to more effective treatments for what is a very distressing condition.

If the treatment were endorsed, the next step would be to ensure that the people who might benefit from it were identified and referred as promptly as possible. The measures that we took last year to extend the eligibility for free NHS sight tests to people aged over 60 will be an excellent start.

Ophthalmic opticians, whom I know prefer to be known as optometrists, have practices on almost every high street. When testing someone's sight they are also required to conduct an examination of the health of the eyes. Opticians can already identify the signs of AMD and, with additional advice and training, could single out the cases of wet AMD that might be susceptible to the new treatment. I also envisage a system of local protocols with hospital ophthalmology departments to make sure that patients are referred promptly for treatment.

My hon. Friend mentioned the Amsler grid, which may be used in some cases to highlight visual distortions that may be symptomatic of AMD. That test is not a substitute for regular eye tests, which, if carried out at least every two years, should ensure that any signs or symptoms may be picked up in the early stages when treatment can be effective in preventing sight loss.

People under 60 are also eligible for NHS sight tests if they are on low incomes or predisposed to eye disease. Even for those on higher incomes the cost of a private sight test is seldom more than £18. In the past, we have collaborated with the Royal National Institute for the Blind on publicity campaigns encouraging people to have their sight tested regularly, and if it would help we would not hesitate to mount another effective campaign highlighting the risks to sight from AMD and the benefits of early diagnosis and prompt treatment.

We have also recently announced new measures to tackle the wide variations in service experienced by patients with cataracts. We have asked local services to put forward proposals for a slice of the £20 million that has been allocated for the next two years, which will help to modernise eye surgery. We believe that, with the elderly population increasing, improving the standard of eye care will represent a step towards improving the quality of their lives.

I hope that I have allayed my hon. Friend's fears that we may not be sufficiently responsive to advances in the treatment of this sight-threatening disease. Although we all hope very much that the research will fulfil its potential, I say as a note of caution that we cannot prejudge its outcome. If it is positively evaluated, we have the facilities to ensure that those people who might benefit are promptly identified and treated.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eleven minutes to Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 20 April 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

CONTINGENCIES FUND ACCOUNTS 1998–99

Ordered,

Accounts of the Contingencies Fund 1998–99, showing:—

(1) The receipts and payments in connection with the Fund in the year ended the 31st day of March 1999.

(2) The distribution of the capital of the Fund at the commencement and close of the year; with the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

Adjournment (Easter)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

9.34 am

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): European framework directive 89/391/EEC may not be the stuff of headlines, but, since it was incorporated in our health and safety regulations, it has become apparent that its implementation could threaten the livelihoods of external health and safety consultants. It appears that firms are now being encouraged to use only in-house employees in that role, rather than employ external consultants.

I was alerted to the problem last June by constituents of mine who have run a very successful health and safety consultancy in my area for more than 35 years. They employ 23 people, are very good at what they do and are highly regarded.

For the past 10 months, we have corresponded with Ministers and with the Health and Safety Executive. My constituents have also attended consultation meetings and have met the chief executive of the HSE. However, although many issues have been resolved, it is obvious that the question of to whom firms should turn for advice still has not been satisfactorily resolved.

I understand that the present view in the corridors of power is that what, for want of a better term, I shall call the consultancy culture that developed in the 1980s and 1990s is to be overturned.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Good.

Ms Jones: My hon. Friend says that that is good, but I suggest that he listens to what I have to say.

There is a long tradition of self-employment and of small firms in my part of the country, which stretches back to the 19th century. There are very good consultants in my area, who clearly predate what happened in the 1980s and 1990s and who are good at what they do. If we are not careful, they will be swept away, and that will not benefit anyone.

We must stop swinging from one extreme to another. Some consultants who set up in the 1980s may not have been as experienced as they should have been. They charged large fees and did not do a particularly good job, but most people who employ consultants now know what to look for and can tell the cowboys from the true experts.

Another problem is that small firms needing health and safety advice often find that it is not viable to employ their own staff. They prefer to go to another business and buy in the expertise that they need. In some circumstances, therefore, the EEC directive is not entirely realistic.

The Ministers whom we have approached have been very understanding, and, in discussions, the HSE has been very helpful to my constituents. It will now produce leaflets and literature informing firms about the health and safety advice that they must get and where to find it. However, the trade press still seems keen to push the line that firms should no longer use external consultants. The February edition of the magazine *Safety Management* clearly stated in its first paragraph:

> Long-awaited changes to the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations came into force . . . making it clear that employers should use competent employees for advice on health and safety matters instead of calling in external specialists.

That is the advice being given in the health and safety industry, so it is no wonder that my constituents are extremely worried.

The many small firms similar to the one run by my constituents employ a lot of people, and many redundancies could follow if they are driven out of business and go to the wall. I know that that is not the intention of the Government, who have made it perfectly clear that they are business friendly and want to help small businesses. I am sure that they would say that I am reporting an unfortunate interpretation of the guidelines.

However, I hope that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, who will reply to the debate, will request that his ministerial colleagues keep a very close eye on the implementation of the directive. It will not do my constituents any good if their firm folds, and the future would be very bleak for other constituents of mine who might lose their jobs as a result.

The guidelines are being implemented. I hope that the Government will monitor very carefully to whom firms go for health and safety advice. It would benefit no one if excellent consultancies were driven to the wall.

9.39 am

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): My constituents would not forgive me if I allowed the House to rise for the Easter recess without raising yet again the issue of the Royal hospital, Haslar. It is overwhelmingly the most important issue in my constituency and in south Hampshire and one of the most important issues facing the Ministry of Defence, the Army, the Navy and the Air Force.

The background to the case is well known. In 1994, the then Government decided in "Defence Costs Study 15" that there should be one service hospital—one centre of defence medical excellence—at the Royal hospital, Haslar in Gosport. That decision was implemented over the next five years or so and the job of co-ordinating the work of the Army, Navy and Air Force was proceeding well. Then, on 10 December 1998, the Government announced to everyone's disbelief the closure of the only tri-service hospital as, would you believe it, a measure to promote

[Mr. Peter Viggers]

better services within the defence medical services. It was proposed to close the only hospital that was thought to be a way ahead and to open a new centre of medical excellence somewhere else, as yet unknown.

A year or so later, it has been announced that that centre of medical excellence will be in Birmingham. I have not yet come across a single person serving in the Army, Navy or Air Force who is enthused about that idea. Birmingham has no particular service connection, unlike many of the other places that might have been chosen.

The reaction to the announcement was dramatic. I announced that we would hold a rally and march, and we thought that we might have 1,000 or 2,000 people, possibly 5,000. I was surprised when I heard that the police were planning for 10,000, and in fact 22,000 joined in the rally and march—quite a gathering. It was led by Members of Parliament. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) and for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson) for joining us on that occasion and to the Lord Bishop of Portsmouth who, on this as on many other things, is giving a local lead. We marched across to Haslar hospital.

All the people in the Gosport peninsula, and virtually all those to whom I speak in the Ministry of Defence, want to see Haslar retained. They recognise that it has outstanding facilities. It has a world-leading MRI scanner, a hyperbaric unit and a burns unit, and £35 million has been spent on it in the past 10 years. To close it would be the most awful mistake. The fact remains, as declared in a number of speeches and in the outstanding publication that has been produced by the Save Haslar group, of which I am the chairman, that there is a case for retention of the hospital. All those arguments remain.

People in the armed forces are deeply worried that the loss of doctors and nurses will continue in the armed forces until Haslar is confirmed as a centre of defence medical excellence. The move to Birmingham would involve moving not only doctors and nurses but the school of defence medicine, which is at Fort Blockhouse adjacent to Haslar. That would cause intense local difficulty.

I have talked so far only about the defence aspects of Haslar hospital. As it is also a civilian hospital that is effectively the district general hospital for my constituency, cases arise daily that demonstrate how much it is needed. Only on Tuesday, I received a letter from an 82-year-old constituent who told me the story of a friend and neighbour who was admitted to hospital for a heart operation. He was prepared for the operation, taken to the operating theatre and then taken back and told that he could go home because no intensive care unit bed was available. His operation was postponed for two weeks. He returned home and the following day his wife died, perhaps as a result of the stress of having her husband home from hospital. That is just one story.

On Monday this week, I received an updating letter from another constituent who lives in Stubbington, but prefers not to be named. In January 1999, she was told that she needed a triple heart bypass and that if it were delayed by up to two years she would have a 40 per cent. chance of surviving. She was told that the waiting time would be nine months. In November 1999, she was told that the waiting time would be between 12 and 15 months. She is now told that it is perhaps 17 months or longer. The hospital hopes to give her a waiting time of 18 months. So in a year, the waiting time for a cardiac operation in my constituency has increased from nine to 17 months. There is no immediate prospect of that lady being given a date for her operation. Civilian cases are being severely postponed and beds are needed that are not available elsewhere. My constituents believe that it would be lunacy to close a hospital that is superbly equipped from both a civilian and defence medicine point of view.

The main reason given for the closure of Haslar hospital is that it is impossible for doctors and nurses to receive accreditation from the royal colleges. I submit that that problem can be overcome. Accreditation is entirely a matter of training and it must be possible to co-ordinate the work at Haslar with that in Portsmouth, Winchester and Southampton, and to provide training in conjunction with other local hospitals. It would be madness for Haslar to close.

My constituents are becoming concerned and several are rather frustrated that the campaign to save Haslar has not resulted in an announcement by the Government that they will change their minds. I should like to send them a message of hope and determination. We believe that we will win. If at this point I demand that the Government state, yes or no, whether they will save Haslar hospital, of course they will say no, that they will not save the hospital; that they made the announcement 16 months ago that they would close it. Faced with such a demand, of course the Government will stick to their guns.

What I say to my constituents is that the facts are changing around us. The intention is to move to Birmingham, but there is no enthusiasm in the defence medical services for such a move. I therefore predict that the move may not take place, or at least will take place in rather different circumstances. It is also intended to build up a Ministry of Defence hospital unit within Haslar and then to transfer that to Queen Alexandra hospital, Cosham. I maintain that that, too, is unlikely to happen. It was intended that the move should happen in about 2002. Now it will happen in about 2005 or 2007—do I hear 2009? I suspect that the move will not take place.

I have received a number of reports from senior personnel who have visited Haslar and have been surprised to see what the facilities are—the MRI scanner and the hyperbaric unit—and to see the administration unit. Haslar administers hospital units deployed in times of emergency. There is a large number of ancillary units within Haslar that it would be extremely inconvenient to move to Birmingham or somewhere else. I suspect that that, too, will be an argument in favour of retaining Haslar.

Two hospital ships are to be constructed. It is logical that they should be based at Portsmouth. Where better than Haslar to link with the hospital ships? I cannot imagine that it would be easy for hospital ships to link with Birmingham. In that and in so many other ways, I suspect that the need for Haslar will gradually become more clear.

Casevacs—emergency casualties removed from the field of operations—can readily be moved to Haslar. There is no space for them in Birmingham and no arrangements have been made for them so far. I suspect that the Government will realise that the failure to fast-track medical treatment for people in the armed forces is becoming a serious problem. Another constituent

of mine is a young Marine reservist. While on a Marine operation, he incurred an injury to his back. He will have to wait 18 months to have that injury rectified because he is joining the queue with all the civilians. I suspect that the Ministry of Defence will realise that it will be advantageous to be able to fast-track medical treatment for military personnel. The only way to do that is to have a dedicated hospital.

The health authority has consulted locally on retention of Haslar as an out-patient unit seeing 60,000 patients a year compared with the 55,000 who are currently seen at Haslar. All that consultation procedure is predicated on the cross-link unit being made available by the Ministry of Defence to the civilian authorities. If the cross-link—the centre of Haslar—is not made available, the consultation procedure will have been invalid, and we shall have to start again.

For all the reasons that I have given, I say to my constituents, "Do not fear that the campaign to which you have committed yourselves so wholeheartedly is faltering or that the taskforce will lack determination." We are determined to retain Haslar not only as a civilian out-patient unit but as a hospital serving the defence medical services. I say to my constituents, "Have faith and join us in the determination to do that."

9.49 am

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, will be aware that, a few years ago, the Government inherited the responsibilities of the then ill-fated British Coal, including the long-standing problems of payments for bronchitis and emphysema to about 100,000 miners. No one can deny that a prompt start was made. Under British Coal, it had seemed impossible for us to make any headway whatever.

Not long after the Government inherited that problem, we were able to celebrate success in the courts: the money would be paid. After that Manchester decision, the Government declared that they would spend between £2.5 billion and £3 billion to compensate those miners. That was a good start—a fast start; we were on our way.

However, the difficulties have been many. I have raised them in the House on several occasions and feel it necessary to speak about the matter again today. When the Labour Government introduced pneumoconiosis payments in the 1970s, we managed to make the payments quickly because not many solicitors were involved and because we were dealing with only eight or 10 sections of the National Union of Mineworkers, and with the solicitors for NACODS—the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers—and for the British Association of Colliery Management. That was it. They were able to agree a scale of payments, and in next to no time every beneficiary under that scheme had received their money.

The position was not acceptable for a minority of people, but, after a few grouses, most people accepted the sliding scale and the system has worked happily ever since—except, of course, for those who did not achieve the 10 per cent. threshold in the first place. There are arguments about that. However, it was a success story.

The current problem is different. First, the NUM was shattered by the previous Government—the union was in fragments. Some areas had no pits left; some had no officials; and the whole superstructure of the NUM had been almost dismantled in many places. The net result was that some solicitors had an eye for an opportunity. We can all see their adverts on telly: they can get us money for anything—for tumbling over the pavement and God knows what else. They must be making a small fortune and their advertisements cost more than the ones for a general election, but I shall not go into that.

Those solicitors saw an opportunity; they saw that £3 billion and thought, "We're going to have a slice of that." Before we could bat an eye, they were in the pit villages, taking over the town hall for a few days. They said, "Come and meet us; we'll get you the money." The situation is different in Scotland, where the NUM still has its own solicitors, and in areas such as the one represented by my hon. Friend the Minister, but in the pit villages where there is nothing left of the NUM, those fly-by-night solicitors went through like a dose of Epsom salts. They told people that they would get them the moon, but people are still waiting.

There is a big problem in that the Government and the other agencies trying to tackle it are having to deal with as many as 300 solicitors instead of only a dozen sets of solicitors. Imagine that: 300 solicitors, who work on the principle that if they can stretch it out, they will get more money for themselves. There are rare exceptions—there are bound to be some good solicitors—but the general principle is that they do not answer letters, as I did this morning. We send off our letters straight away and our constituents thank us. Solicitors do not work like that. They work on the following basis: they do not answer letters but make people think that they are working hard for a week or a fortnight. That is what is happening to the poor old miners, heaving their lungs up—some of them dying—who want that money paid out.

During the past 18 months, I have not been backward in coming forward to explain the problem. I am still doing that. Despite that, the Government announced that, in order to hurry things up, there would be a handling charge for every solicitor for every case. The Government will pay the solicitors money—taxpayers' money—to speed the process along.

Not content with a handling charge paid for by the rest of us, some of those solicitors decided that they wanted commission as well. In some settlements that had been made, they took from 5 to 15 per cent. extra. It is time that that was stopped.

There are other delays. My hon. Friend is probably aware of them. We now have to pay the doctors as much as £100 a day for getting out miners' medical records. The miners had to go before the agency, Healthcall, to have their chests examined for a percentage assessment. The doctors are being paid £100 a day and they too are dragging their feet.

On top of that, some of the tinpot health authorities are involved in the delay. A ring-fenced sum of up to £3 billion is being handed over by the Government—no problem, the money will be paid—but, for the reasons that I have outlined, we are not able to get that money into the pockets of miners or miners' widows. That is why it is important to bring the matter to the attention of the House today—to get the show on the road.

I have mentioned that there are variations between regions and coalfields. We want to make sure that, when the payouts are made—some have been made, as my hon. Friend knows—and speeded up, there are no regional

[Mr. Dennis Skinner]

variations. Payments must be made on a similar basis, even in those areas where there is no NUM structure and where we have to deal with some of those fly-by-night, touting solicitors.

That is my first point. My second point is that the Government will be the beneficiary of about £20 billion—maybe more—from the licence auction of the new generation mobile phones. I do not have one, nor do I have a pager, so I am not into the technical stuff at all, but people tell me that there is real money involved. It is certainly more than we are paying out to the miners—a lot more.

In the run-up to the next election, we should not drag our feet over that money. I was delighted at the announcement on Monday that £100 million would go to the mining areas in order to save the few pits that the Tories did not close. I would have done things differently, but the money is better than a poke in the eye with a big stick.

I was pleased to see the faces of the Tory MPs who did not know what to do about that statement. Some of them wanted to oppose it on principle, because they do not believe in public expenditure, but once they had thought about it, they said, "Oh, I'm not sure about that." Their reaction was mixed. I like that disorientation—I enjoy it. When I hear that there is £20 billion to spend, I should like to do that once a fortnight. *[Laughter.]* Seriously, I have a list that I sent to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is important. We have had two years of Tory spending plans. I am pleased that is all over. We should never have followed them, but that is gone; it is behind us. We have all this money: we have paid off the national debt and there is £20 billion or even £25 billion extra.

Just as a starter, we have to sort out the pension problem. We did not accept the Tories' unemployment figures. When we came into government, we decided there should be two sets. They were announced yesterday. We should have a cost of living index for pensioners and those who are not in work. There should be an index that identifies the costs for those pensioners who are at the bottom of the pile. We must get these current decisions settled, with a view to ensuring that the Government can announce before the next general election—probably in the autumn spending review—exactly what the new index is and what the new payments will be. I am trying to get the Government off the hook. *[Laughter.]* This is only friendly advice.

In that brown envelope that I sent to the Prime Minister, I submitted a long list of things that need to be done, because I am absolutely sure that Madam Speaker would be utterly pleased if she thought that these statements were being made by the Government before John Humphrys got hold of them on the "Today" programme. I am trying to kill a lot of birds with a lot of stones here.

The Government have £25 billion, or whatever, to use. A statement has been half-heartedly made about what will happen to those who are in long-term care. This is the first time that any Government have even thought of tackling that issue. Some pensioners finish up in warden-assisted accommodation, of which there are many examples in our constituencies, but some others have to go into long-term care—some, sadly, with senile dementia—and lose everything. Now that we have had a study on that subject, I have reason to believe that there will be another announcement on the subject shortly. I would like it to be made before the local government elections, and I have a proposal to make about what should be done with that money.

When the Government came to power, they used money from the public utilities, which had been making vast profits under the previous Government, to introduce the new deal. It was not a bad idea to use that money. The Government tell me that unemployment figures are about 800,000 or 900,000 less than they would have been had the Labour Government not come to power. Therefore, the new deal was a success in its way.

We should have a new deal on long-term nursing care. It should be launched with the use of some of the largesse from the licence auction. I am not saying that that could be done year after year, because the payment is a one-off and that new deal would have to be financed out of general taxation afterwards, but the launch could be made of a free long-term nursing care payment straight out of that money.

Those are a couple of the things that I wanted to draw to the attention of the Minister and all the relevant Ministers. I am saying that we must speed up payments for chronic ailments and bronchitis, and we must ensure that vibration white finger payments are made speedily. Let us try to get the job completed before the next general election. If we do, there will be a lot of satisfied customers in the coalfields.

If we can also announce in the next few weeks that long-term care will be free for everyone who, unfortunately, has to spend their declining years in those places, it will be of benefit not only to those people—in one fell swoop, we shall have won the support of all pensioners, feeble or otherwise, if they know that a Government at long last have managed to grasp this very important issue and settle it, with the result that not only pensioners but all their families will thank us for ever.

10.4 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It is a pleasure to follow two such powerful speakers as the hon. Members for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) and for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). I agree with every word that the hon. Member for Gosport said about Haslar.

There was much with which I identified in the speech by the hon. Member for Bolsover. It may surprise the House to learn that I too represent a mining constituency. The coal mines are closed but there are still miners, and I very much identify with the points that the hon. Gentleman made. I hope that areas such as the Somerset coalfield will not be forgotten, and that the miners who are suffering in exactly the same way as their colleagues elsewhere in the country will have access to the money that they should have.

Although the three points that I shall raise are well worn, they deserve to be addressed yet again before the House rises. The first—the issue of post offices—has been discussed ad nauseam in the past few weeks, but I make no apology for returning to it. I believe that we are making progress with the Government, not entirely as a result of the efforts of hon. Members. That progress has much to do with the 3 million people who were prepared to put their name on a petition and make plain their concerns

about what was happening to their local post offices, not just because of the people directly involved in the post offices, but because of all the people who depend on the presence of that service in their communities—the pensioners who do not want to be encumbered with bank accounts with which they are not familiar, but want to continue to use cash, drawing it from a post office, from people they know, in their local community.

We have made progress in three ways. First, the Government have recognised that there will be a continuing need to allow people the choice of drawing benefits in cash from their local post office. Secondly, the Government have recognised that there is a need to maintain the integrity of the sub-post office network. Thirdly, an amendment has been introduced to the Postal Services Bill that provides for a subsidy to be paid.

Unfortunately for sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, there is a lack of definition on all three aspects. Business decisions are being taken now. People are deciding whether to invest in a post office business, whether they can safely retire and whether there will be a buyer for their business. More clarity is needed.

Therefore, I make a plea for the Government to talk now to the Post Office and to sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, and put flesh on the bones of the arrangements that they are starting to develop. I do not take a partisan view of this. The issue is too important to use as a party political weapon. I believe that there are hon. Members on both sides of the House who recognise the value of sub-post offices. I was sorry that the Government took so long to respond to the legitimate concerns. I congratulate them on the fact that they are starting to do so, but they must finish the job. We must have clarity.

Secondly, I want to discuss the rural economy. I make no apology for doing so, because so many people—not only those who are involved in agriculture but all those in businesses that derive their income from agriculture, directly or indirectly—are still in a desperate position. I saw a tenant farmer, a dairy farmer, a man who had worked on the land all his life, a strong man, in tears in my presence because I mentioned the word "retirement" and it suddenly came to him that he had no means of retiring; he had nothing. His business was on its last legs, and once he retired he would be left with no house, no business, no capital—nothing. We must address that issue.

The only thing that is keeping the agriculture industry afloat at the moment is the extraordinary maintenance of the value of land prices. Land and quota are maintaining their prices, not because people are investing in agriculture but because they are investing in farmhouses, parkland and paddocks for their horses.

A farm in my village is for sale, and the estate agents who are selling that land have advertised it as a leisure dairy farm. Anyone who lives in a rural area knows that if there is an oxymoron to end all oxymorons, it is one involving the use of the words "leisure" and "dairy". That is how the estate agents describe that farm, which has provided a living for generations, in order to sell it. I find that offensive.

The Government have made moves in the right direction in terms of the farm summit, but they do not go far enough. The pig sector is still in desperate straits despite the measures that have been taken, as is the dairy sector, which is so important in my area. Those sectors are not asking for more subsidy. They do not ask continually for more money. They simply want a fair deal for their effort. At the moment, they are not getting that from the processors and supermarkets. Until milk prices are set at a reasonable level, businesses will continue to fail. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry could help by sorting out the successors to Milk Marque to ensure that we have the vertical integration that enables milk to be sold profitably.

My final point on this subject concerns the need to consider carefully the position of the tenant farmer—the farmer who does not have capital and who is seeing his business disappear, and, with it, his home. We need to find some way of providing security for those people. We need to find for them pension arrangements, which they do not have. The retirement scheme which we proposed, but which the Government rejected, would have gone some way towards meeting that need.

Thirdly, I turn to schools and education in my area. On this, too, I follow a well-worn track. How can it be right that a child in my constituency in a local education authority school can receive from the Government £1,400 a year less than a child in a leafy suburb of London? It is not just in Somerset that children lose out, but in many areas across the country. The extraordinary distribution system does not recognise the value of the child.

All sorts of academic arguments can be advanced in support of a better deal for our children. I do not want to go into that today, but simply want to say that a child, wherever he lives, is entitled to have a reasonable sum spent on his education. That is not happening. It is no good talking about three years of stability when those are three years of injustice to children in Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Derbyshire or wherever education authorities are losing out under the present formula. The Government need to address that.

The Government must also address the problem of capital. As the hon. Member for Bolsover said, we had two years of sticking to Tory spending guidelines, which meant that there was no money. Now, at last, there is beginning to be some improvement and I give the Government credit for that. Temporary classrooms in my constituency are being replaced by permanent ones. I have a list of five or six this year, but we have 800 temporary classrooms in the county of Somerset and some have been temporary for 40 years. Until we address the problem of capital expenditure in our schools, we will not provide the environment in which children can learn successfully and teachers can give of their best; nor will we give parents the confidence in the state education system that I believe they should have.

For all those reasons, I ask Ministers to look again at the distribution of resources and to make sure that the education, education, education pledge works for all, not just those in city areas which sometimes seem to receive a rather better deal.

10.14 am

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I want to raise an issue that I know is troubling many of my hon. Friends and which is causing a lot of anger throughout the country. I refer to the wave of bank closures that are hitting all areas of our nation. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) mentioned the rural economy, and it is in the rural areas

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

that banks are being closed. I want in particular to talk about my constituency, where some of those bank closures have recently taken place.

East Cleveland has seen the sudden announcement of the closure of two small branches of Barclays and a large branch of NatWest. The villages affected are Skelton, Brotton and Loftus. They are not small, sleepy hamlets, but sizeable villages that could be seen as small country towns. They are neighbouring communities on the fringes of urban Teesside. Barclays has now closed branches in Skelton and Brotton. NatWest is planning to close its branch in Loftus.

The closure of the Skelton branch of Barclays follows an earlier closure of the local branch of NatWest. There is now no effective banking presence in a town of some 6,000 men, women and children. The closure of the Barclays branch in Brotton means that there are now no banking facilities whatever in a community of some 4,000 people. Loftus is the largest settlement in that part of East Cleveland: the town, with small villages and estates, has a population of some 7,000. The NatWest branch there is the biggest bank in the town. If it closes—the closure is expected in early May—it will leave the town, indeed most of east Cleveland, with only one branch of the big four clearing banks: the Loftus branch of Barclays. You will understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that most of my constituents are sceptical about that branch remaining open for the foreseeable future, in view of the track record of that particular banking concern.

I need to say something about what the closures and threatened closures will mean for many of my constituents. With the one exception of Barclays in Loftus, there will be no banking facilities between the town of Saltburn and Whitby—a distance of nearly 20 miles. That area is not uninhabited moorland. It covers large and small communities, many farms and a host of industrial employers—the largest being Boulby potash mine. Boulby is the largest deep mine in Europe, with some 700 employees, who have their wages paid through automatic bank transfer. Many of them have been hit by the Barclays closures, and 103 of them have been hit by the announcement of the intended closure of the Loftus NatWest. In no case was the company informed of the closure proposals by any of the banks concerned, and the same is true for other employers: the 30-odd firms based on the Skelton trading estate, the large Skinningrove steel plant of Corus plc, the nearby Skinningrove fabrication works of the multinational Caterpillar company, and the other varied employers ranging from the local bus depot to the East Cleveland national health service hospital facility.

The local authority first knew of the proposals in the same way as most of the residents—through the local paper. No consultation was built into the proposals. Many small shopkeepers are furious. In Brotton I was told that there were many small shops where the loss of cashing-in and change facilities could cause closures. That is because many of those shops are run by a husband or wife, leaving the other partner to take a job elsewhere. The closures mean that they may have to close shutters and drive the three miles to Saltburn and back just to exchange and bank some change.

Local employees are furious. Many of them have relied on a quick trip into the nearest village on a Friday to draw out some spending money, whereas now they have to trek to a distant town after work to get their cash from the nearest hole in the wall that may be working. For those without access to a car—some 30 per cent. of households on some of our local estates do not have such access—the outlook is bleak. From Brotton, the nearest branch of any bank is in Saltburn. It may be only three miles, but there is only one bus an hour. If a constituent misses a connection back, it could take him up to two hours just to cash a cheque. He could get a more regular bus to the market town of Guisborough, but that is several miles away and the return bus fare is £2.70.

The banks' attitude towards local feelings was contemptuous. Local management at Barclays has decided to preserve silence on the subject, relying on national press releases, but NatWest is worse. When the local newspaper for Loftus, the East Cleveland edition of the *Evening Gazette* asked what alternatives there were for NatWest customers, its press spokesman said:

> I think there is a small supermarket next door, and they do offer cashback facilities.

That is true, but what a disgraceful attitude to suggest blithely that someone has to get a minimum of £10-worth of shopping merely to get cash out of the till. People are expected to queue at a public checkout to get cash, but no mention is made of other functions such as paying in cheques, dealing with loans and investments or inquiring about services such as mortgages or ISAs.

We should be more able to affect the levels of private sector investment in areas suffering from isolation or relative deprivation. We all know that financial exclusion is not just a problem for the deprived in rural areas. I mentioned the difficulties that the closures will mean for small businesses in loss of turnover and increased difficulties in acquiring change, and there are associated security issues of having more money on their premises.

Many elderly and disabled people experience mobility problems: for them, cash machines, even where they are available, are simply not a suitable option. Closing small local banks can mean the premature loss of financial independence and social interaction, because many local banks act as the linchpin for small communities.

Respected campaigning organisations such as Help the Aged and Age Concern have joined other campaigning organisations in a campaign for community banking services, and they have been vocal in their concern and dismay at the recent spate of bank closures. The Council for the Protection of Rural England, Friends of the Earth, Transport 2000 and others are concerned that, with bankless communities losing the lifeblood of the high street, people will increasingly travel out of town to shop, creating added congestion that is to the detriment of the environment.

Let us consider the figures, bearing in mind the fact that unless we do something about the problem, things will only get worse. In the 10 years since January 1990, more than 4,000 banks have been closed in England, Wales and Scotland. Independent consultants predict that a further 4,000 are set to close in the next five years. That will leave more than 1,000 communities across the United Kingdom without banking facilities.

Tackling social exclusion is one of the biggest challenges facing us. Only last week, we saw the publication of the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, about which I have tabled an early-day motion. I hope that all Members will sign it. That was the theme

of a speech made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and the message from Ministers is that social exclusion has been, and will remain, at the top of the Government's agenda.

In November last year, my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury published the findings of the social exclusion unit's policy action team—PAT 14—which considered access to financial services. In her introduction to the report, she says:

> The banks in particular have a major task ahead of them, extending services to low-income households and developing delivery channels accessible to people in deprived neighbourhoods.

She concluded:

> The banks have to recognise the importance of the role they play, the extent to which we all rely on them and their responsibility to sustain equal and open access to those who wish to use them.

The whole point of the report was to identify ways in which the financial elements of social exclusion could be tackled.

In his recent review of efficiency, competition and innovation in the banking industry, Don Cruickshank singled out two main areas for criticism. The first was retail current account banking, which costs householders and small business users between £3 billion and £5 billion a year too much. That is the equivalent to £400 a year for every account holder. The second was the payments system—with indefensible delays, lack of transparency and high charges.

Earlier this week, the Treasury Committee took evidence from three of the big four banks—from the chief executives of HSBC, Lloyds TSB and Barclays. NatWest had to give a presentation in the City the following day, so its representative did not bother to turn up. That says a lot about NatWest. The chief executive of Lloyds TSB made a welcome concession, which obviously surprised his competitors. Mr. Ellwood promised to preserve Lloyds TSB branches where it was the last remaining bank in a remote community. That is a start.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office will reassure us that the Government treat the issue seriously and that he will do everything that he can to protect our constituents in rural communities.

10.25 am

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): Before the House adjourns for the Easter recess, there are several points that I wish to make. I shall try to do that quickly and the House will be pleased to learn that I have no complaints about the Palace theatre, Westcliff. It continues to remain open, and I have been invited to attend a performance of a Noel Coward play next Thursday. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) has suggested, perhaps one day I shall also be invited to perform.

I had toyed with the idea of going into detail about a very serious allegation that I have received about the abuse of cadets at Winchester barracks. However, I hope that, when I return to my office, I will discover that my efficient secretary has called the Ministry of Defence and that I will be able to reassure a number of people. I hope that I will not have to go into detail on that matter.

The first point that I wish to make is about the Lady McAdden breast unit centre in Southend, which is known as BUST. Sir Stephen McAdden was a distinguished Member of the House and represented the constituency of Southend, East. The townswomen's guild started a fund to build the centre in 1968 when 38p was deposited in an account. The centre was eventually opened in 1976 and Sir Stephen's widow, Lady McAdden, heads the unit.

I am sorry to say that, when I visited the unit on Monday, I found a rather unhappy situation. In short, there are great demands on the unit's facilities, but unfortunately it has encountered difficulties with Essex area health authority and the trust; I received a pleasant letter from the health authority this morning.

The unit is entirely maintained by public donations and £5 million has been raised so far; running costs are roughly £300,000 a year. A White Paper published a couple of years ago seems to be the source of disquiet at the unit, because it condemned the practice of palpation that is combined with mammographies at the unit. There has been a lack of proper consultation on that point.

All Members have attended breast awareness receptions in the House over the past few weeks and I pay tribute to all the organisations involved; I attended a local charity event in my constituency.

The Lady McAdden unit had been the only source of breast education and screening of women in my area before the breast screening programme was introduced in 1992 for ladies aged from 50 to 64. The unit deals with women of all ages and it had very good relations with the local hospital until 1997. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case; support for both medical and advisory services has been withdrawn. However, a report by the national health service quality assurance team in April 1999 recognised that the unit played an important part in health promotion of well women and it did not want its existence to be compromised.

When the Minister has time, will he have a word with the Department of Health? I am sure that heads need gently knocking together. The unit has been developed as a result of voluntary subscriptions, but many press reports about it have appeared, and BUST has not had the opportunity to respond to all the negative publicity. I very much hope that the true value of this wonderful organisation will be recognised. It has saved an enormous amount of money for the national health service. I have received many letters and petitions and I hope that the Minister will do his best with the Department.

My second point concerns private and residential nursing homes. In 1991, Southend, West was ranked 27th in terms of the proportion of the population receiving pensions, but I think that it is now much higher in the ranking than that. It is therefore little wonder that I occasionally have to shout at people because as my constituents grow older, they become a little hard of hearing.

I know at first hand the challenges that have to be met in Southend, West if we are to look after our senior citizens decently. Private nursing homes are being short-changed. The hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) touched on one or two of these issues. To save money, all such homes are being described as residential, even though they all have to provide nursing care. Some of the rules and regulations are barmy. Private home owners say that inspectors are telling them that the rooms are two inches too small, but the quality of care has little to do with chintzy curtains and other fixtures and fittings.

[Mr. David Amess]

This year, private nursing homes are getting a funding increase of 1.4 per cent., which is below inflation. Council-run homes, which have fees of £485.50 a week or £69 a day, are receiving an increase of £50 per week, whereas private homes, which are overwhelmingly in the majority, are receiving half that amount. Private home owners, who have underpinned the service for so long, deserve better treatment than they are receiving at the moment. When I visited Southend hospital on Monday, I found, sadly, that 74 beds were being blocked by men and women who would be better off in one of those nursing homes.

I turn now to crime. We all know that if we hold law and order meetings in our constituency, no criminals turn up, and we meet all the usual people who say how dreadful it all is. What is happening? In Essex there are cuts. I meet the chief constable and learn about all the new technology, targets and strategies, such as the community safety strategy; glossy magazines are produced, and the great and the good turn up to meetings. Some of those people are paid a great deal—I do not know who is running their organisation while they attend strategy meetings. They all talk about crime, but at the end of the day what is happening? In my view, not enough.

Over Christmas, I was summoned, in a nice way, by a local priest. I turned up, like Mother Teresa, because he was having a problem with local yobs and no one was available to deal with it. I thought that I would act like Joe public and use the council's emergency service. I got on the phone to the service and the person on the other end did not know who the hell I was or what a Member of Parliament was. I found out later that our emergency service is being run from Croydon, which is not particularly helpful. I do not know what the many senior citizens in my constituency would do in similar circumstances. The sad end to that story is that that priest has left the area as a result of intimidation.

Day in and day out, I find that the police are doing their best in difficult circumstances. How do we deal with graffiti? We seem to scrub the walls and receive publicity, and then the next person with a spray can comes along. Some people might think that this is a minor issue, but in fact it is very important. It lowers the tone of the neighbourhood when every wall has graffiti on it. Some councillors think that the solution is to have a wall dedicated to graffiti. How daft can anyone be? The idea that all the people spraying paint will gather at one wall and do nice designs is ridiculous. I hope that the Minister will have a word with the Home Secretary to find out whether he, as a former Essex man, has any bright ideas about how to deal with graffiti.

My next point concerns employment agencies. For many years, I was involved in recruitment. I used to think that employment agencies were the lowest of the low because, as a student, I used to register with them and find it jolly difficult to get a job. However, I ended up running my own employment agency and I have interviewed thousands of people, so I am now biased and think that such agencies do a good job in difficult circumstances.

Several constituents who run employment agencies have contacted me because they are concerned about the Government's proposals. If an agency supplies temporary members of staff to an organisation, there is a clause in their contract whereby they can join the organisation permanently, and the agency receives a part of their overall salary. There is also a clause that says that when the temp has left, the employer cannot engage that person after a certain period. For many agencies, that period is 12 weeks, and the Government are trying to reduce it to four weeks. Clever employers, who are practical operators, will find a way to get round that, and employment agencies will lose their money.

Jobcentres cannot manage all recruitment, and the private sector plays a valuable role. The Government are not being fair to small businesses and British entrepreneurs, so I hope that the Minister will have a word with a colleague in the relevant Department.

I turn now to proposed bus lanes on the A13. Southend suffers terrible traffic congestion. I do not have an easy answer to that, because one cannot simply knock down all the houses and widen the roads, but the council is absolutely potty to propose to run a bus lane all along the A13 in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor).

I criticise the council for failing to consult the majority of local traders. I am told that if the proposal goes ahead, it will have a considerable impact on them. Of the £2.3 million that has been earmarked for the scheme, a considerable amount—a quarter—has been spent analysing the proposal, which has caused tremendous upset among local traders. For example, Sancto, a company which has been in the town since 1910 and has been operated by four generations of the same family, was not consulted. That is not good enough when the Government are saying that we should have open government and more consultation. After all, the council is run by Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Southend needs a bypass to the north. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has cut the road-building programme, and I hope that the Minister will ask his colleagues to reconsider that. I hope that he and other hon. Members enjoy a happy Easter, but it will be a happier Easter for Southend, West if he can come up with a few answers for my constituents.

10.37 am

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I declare an interest in the issue that I shall bring to the attention of the House. I chair the Cyprus Commonwealth parliamentary group in the House, and I want to raise the case of Loizidou *v.* Turkey. Mrs. Loizidou is a Greek Cypriot, and her home was in Kyrenia, which is now in the occupied area of northern Cyprus. As a result of the Turkish military invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Mrs. Loizidou was forced to leave her home and possessions.

The case involves two members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Cyprus and Turkey. As hon. Members will know, the United Kingdom is also a member of that Parliamentary Assembly. I raise the issue this morning because Cyprus is a Commonwealth country, and the United Kingdom is one of the guarantor powers for the Republic of Cyprus.

The case goes back some years, and, while preliminary discussions about it were taking place, there was hope that the case would be resolved. It went before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg in July 1998. Turkey and Cyprus had every opportunity to present their views on the case to the court, and they did so. The court found by 15 votes to two in favour of Mrs. Loizidou.

The case came before the court under article 50 of the European convention on human rights, which clearly states:

> Every natural or legal person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of their possessions.

That is something that Mrs. Loizidou cannot do. Her property and possessions are in the occupied area of northern Cyprus, to which she is refused access by the Turkish military authorities. That action by Turkey violates article 1 of the first protocol of the convention.

Following the decision of the human rights court of which all Council of Europe states are members, there have been many attempts by the Council, by the Secretary General of the Council and by the Committee of Ministers, which represents the member states of the Council, to ensure Turkey's compliance with the judgment of the court. Regrettably, Turkey continues to refuse to recognise the court's decision.

As a member of the British delegation to the Council of Europe, I have put questions to whoever has been the Chairman-in-Office during the Council's sittings in Strasbourg. I tabled a question to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as long ago as October 1998. I asked the then Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), to set out the actions of the Government with regard to the judgment. On 3 November she replied:

> We are mindful of the obligation of all parties to the European Convention on Human Rights under Article 53 of the Convention to abide by European Court of Human Rights judgments. In the case of Mrs. Loizidou *v.* Turkey, and in line with Council of Europe procedure, the UK, along with other members of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, has invited Turkey to inform the Committee of the measures it proposes to take in consequence of the judgment.—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1998; Vol. 318, c. 541W.]

Despite that reply, there has still been a total refusal by Turkey to honour the judgment. Regrettably, no progress is being made.

At a meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in January, the Chairman-in-Office of the Committee of Ministers, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Brian Cowen, made a statement of regret that the Committee of Ministers had made no progress towards the execution of the judgment in the Loizidou case. He said that it was the unanimous view of the committee that the compulsory jurisdiction of the court is an obligation that is accepted by all contracting parties, which obviously includes Turkey. He added that he had sent a letter to Turkish Foreign Minister Mr. Cem, emphasising the Committee's concern at Turkey's continued failure to meet its obligations.

Recently, I asked the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to express his view about the failure of Turkey to honour the court's decision. He said clearly that he deeply regretted the lack of response and commitment, and that it cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely. So we have clear statements from the Chairman-in-Office of the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

It is apparent to me and to many other parliamentarians that a decision has clearly been made by the European Court of Human Rights in favour of Mrs. Loizidou in a judgment supported by 15 votes to two. Yet we are still seeing a member state totally refusing to honour the judgment. This is at a time when on-going discussions are taking place, in which the Government are involved, about Turkey's possible future membership of the European Union. Is the deliberate flouting of a decision of the European Court of Human Rights acceptable behaviour by a future possible member of the EU? I believe that the Government have a clear duty. Is it acceptable that the case is allowed to drag on? Where do the Government stand on the judgment, and what action will we seek to take, along with our fellow member states of the Council of Europe, to see that Turkey honours the decision of the court, which many members of the Council and Governments believe should have been honoured long ago?

10.46 am

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I shall bring three issues briefly to the attention of the House before we rise for the Easter recess. The first is prompted by a petition that I placed in the Bag last Friday in the name of one of my constituents, Mrs. Holly, whose daughter was tragically killed in a hit-and-run accident in my constituency a few weeks ago. I shall not go into the details because charges have now been brought. However, we would do well to have greater awareness of speed limits and their enforcement.

Largely, my constituency benefits from a 40 mph limit. That is consequent on the nature of the New Forest. However, as I drive through the forest, I am constantly overtaken by cars racing past me. Even when I move from a 40 mph limit to one of 30 in a village, I find it difficult to remember to make that accommodation in my behaviour.

Despite the fact that I speak from the Opposition Benches, I am not critical of Government policy in this respect. I support the thrust of it. My words are of encouragement rather than criticism, but we need to make a greater effort to achieve a change of cultural awareness as regards speed. We have achieved that for drink driving, and, over 30 years, the public attitude to it has changed fundamentally. I should like to see the same change achieved in the public's approach to the enforcement and observance of speed limits.

I receive constant representations about pornography, particularly that which is hard core. I have taken a rather different view from some of my constituents. I have felt that hard-core pornography tends to be less corrosive than other forms because of the lengths to which a person who wishes to acquire it must go to get hold of it. I have always been rather more concerned about the general reduction in standards in the diet of soap operas that people experience. Even before the nine o'clock watershed, they offer a view of sexual behaviour, language and violence which I do not believe represents norms of behaviour. I have always regarded that as a more corrosive influence on society than hard-core pornography.

A few weeks ago, a constituent approached me—a parent—to complain about the nature of pornography that is available on the internet, and the ease with which it could be accessed by adults and, more particularly, by children. In an idle moment, I accessed the internet in my office. Within a few seconds, I was able, without any ingenuity, without using any passwords and without overcoming any security arrangement, to access a number

[Mr. Desmond Swayne]

of pornographic sites. Most of the material was little more titillating than making a phone call from a telephone booth in most parts of London.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): How does my hon. Friend know?

Mr. Swayne: My hon. Friend does well to ask me that question. I have made several telephone calls from London telephone booths, where one inevitably sees such advertisements.

However, I was able to access some extremely disturbing and profoundly corrupting material, and I think it extraordinary that it is so easily accessible. I began myself to feel the powerful nature of that corruption: I could within moments have established my ability to access such material and then moved on, but I found myself lingering over it, with a sense of fascination. I reckon that I was saved by the Division Bell, which called me to my senses and forced me to leave. I felt profoundly the meaning of the words of St. Paul:

> your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

I wonder whether Ministers are alive to the potential for corporate evil that lies within those forces rampant on the internet. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary will be able to assure me that Home Office Ministers are indeed wrestling with the question of whether it is desirable—and, indeed, technically feasible—to restrict the ease of access by vulnerable people to such material.

My third and final point is one that has been raised in early-day motions this Session, in questions to the Secretary of State for Scotland and in questions that I have put to the Leader of the House of Commons. It relates to the desire initially expressed by Members of the Scottish Parliament to reopen the Act of Settlement. At first, the Secretary of State for Scotland gave only a dusty answer to those representations; however, the Government's attitude then appeared to change, and a suggestion was made that the issue might be included in the next Labour party manifesto.

I doubt the need to address the issue. I am not persuaded of the disadvantages that Roman Catholics might feel as a consequence of the Act of Settlement. Sectarianism on the mainland has been in steady decline for many years. After all, it is not long since numbers on the Conservative Benches were augmented by Members representing more than half the seats in Liverpool and Glasgow, elected entirely on the basis of the sectarian vote. Those times have gone, perhaps to the detriment of the Conservative party, but certainly to the benefit of society as a whole.

I speak as man who married a Roman Catholic, who has moved within the Roman Catholic community and who has worshipped in Roman Catholic churches. Never has any Roman Catholic told me that they feel disadvantaged by the settlement that we enjoy—with one exception: this morning, in the Members' bathroom, the Government pairing Whip made such a complaint to me. That extraordinary incident was the first time that I had ever received such a representation.

The historical justification for the settlement we enjoy lies in the English experience of political Catholicism before the glorious revolution. We must examine those issues in their historical context; I do not favour revisionism, whereby we judge the actions of our forefathers by the politically correct standards of the modern age. I accept that the Protestant succession would be difficult to defend in a modern setting, but I believe that those who advocate the reopening of the Act of Settlement have focused on the wrong target.

It is, in fact, the Bill of Rights of 1688 which establishes that the monarch can neither be a Roman Catholic, nor married to a Roman Catholic; and the Coronation Oaths Act of the same year requires the monarch to make a promise—take an oath—to uphold the Protestant religion by law established. Both those Acts were ratified by the Crown in Parliament Act of 1689. Only in 1701, as a consequence of settling the succession, after William and Mary died childless, on Anne, rather than on her Catholic half-brother, were those provisions reinforced and restated in the Act of Settlement, and again in the Act of Union of 1706. The consequence of those Acts is that the monarch cannot be a Roman Catholic or married to one.

The issue of the monarch's wife is rather more problematical: the legislation merely requires that she not be a Roman Catholic; it does not preclude her being anything else. However, the Coronation Oaths Act requires a promise to be made by both the monarch and his queen to uphold the Protestant succession and the Protestant faith. In addition, since the coronation of Edgar in 987, an act of communion according to the rites of the Church is required as part of the coronation. I suspect that it would be difficult for an adherent of another religion to take such an act of communion. Therefore, the position of the monarch's wife is circumcised—*[Interruption.]*—circumscribed to a certain extent.

Reopening those issues would present Parliament with a huge practical difficulty. We are struggling with 28 Government Bills in this Session alone. Consider the consequences of reopening all the constitutional measures that I listed—all of which would have to be taken on the Floor of the House—along with other measures, including the Royal Marriages Act 1772, the bishoprics legislation and the Statute of Westminster 1931, and having to deal with consequent negotiations with other Commonwealth Parliaments. An enormous unravelling of our constitutional arrangements would be required.

I remind the Parliamentary Secretary and the Leader of the House of the words uttered by Cardinal Wolsey when this country embarked on the process of creating an intimate connection between Church and state. On hearing that there was to be a reformation, he said that he wished that many things were to be reformed, but warned that others would come after and reform on that reformation, and that the results of so proceeding would be that there was nothing left. I suspect that that is the agenda of some of the advocates of reform.

In principle, I do not want the issue to be reopened for two reasons. First, the papal bull of 1570 that called on adherents of the Catholic faith to depose their Protestant monarch remains extant. It would be quite improper to reopen our constitutional settlement while it remains. Secondly, as the Prime Minister discovered to his cost, the Roman Catholic faith maintains an exclusiveness about the sacrament of the altar that I do not believe is appropriate in an age of openness and inclusiveness.

The argument has now moved one stage further, with the publication of the report commissioned by the Home Secretary, "Religious Discrimination in England and Wales" by Professor Paul Weller. The interim conclusions, on page 84, state:

> The religious composition of society has changed significantly since the last Coronation and the next Coronation will therefore highlight a series of very important issues and complexities, which it would be best to begin giving consideration to as soon as possible.

I urge Ministers not to give consideration to those issues, for three reasons. First, the demand for such consideration is greatly exaggerated; there is no appetite for such reform. Secondly, adherents of minority religions—not least the Chief Rabbi—have themselves expressed satisfaction with the existing settlement. Thirdly, a society that is prepared constantly to reopen and unravel fundamental values will end up with no such values at all.

The link between the Church and state expressed in the coronation service is much more fundamental and more profound than that link as expressed in the statutes to which I have referred.

The model of monarchy in the coronation service is that of an Old Testament rather than a New Testament monarchy.

It being Eleven o'clock, MADAM SPEAKER *interrupted the proceedings, pursuant to Standing Order No. 11 (Friday sittings).*

Business of the House

11 am

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement on the business of the House. The business for the week after the Easter recess will be as follows:

TUESDAY 2 MAY—Progress on consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill.

WEDNESDAY 3 MAY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 4 MAY—Debate on defence in the world on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 5 MAY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 8 MAY—Remaining stages of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill.

TUESDAY 9 MAY—Progress on remaining stages of the Transport Bill.

WEDNESDAY 10 MAY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Transport Bill.

THURSDAY 11 MAY—Debate on the common agricultural policy on a Government motion. Details will be given in the *Official Report.*

FRIDAY 12 MAY—Private Members' Bills.

[Thursday 11 May:

The European Scrutiny Committee Thirteenth Report (1999/2000 Session) of 5 April 2000 concerning Explanatory Memorandum 6629/00 Parts I and II of 21 March 2000; Council Document 6629/00 of 2 March 2000; and Explanatory Memorandum 6629/00 Parts I and II of 21 March 2000.

The European Scrutiny Committee Twenty-Seventh Report (1998/1999 Session) of 21 July 1999 concerning explanatory Memorandum 9311/99 of 12 July 1999; Council Document 9311/99 of 16 June 1999; and Explanatory Memorandum 9311/99 of 12 July 1999.]

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I thank the right hon. Lady for outlining the business for the two weeks after we return. I hope that, if the pattern of this morning's sitting is repeated in future, the business statement will be made at 9.30 am before the Adjournment debate begins or at 12.30 pm when it finishes. It is unfortunate to have to interrupt them.

The right hon. Lady will know about the enormous anxiety in the House and throughout the country about the unfolding tragedy in Zimbabwe. Although it is unlikely that there will be cause to recall the House next week, will she try to ensure that the Foreign Secretary makes a statement to the House to explain the current position when we reassemble on 2 May? Events in Zimbabwe underline the need for the House to have a proper debate on foreign affairs in the near future. It is some time since we held a wide-ranging debate on foreign affairs.

We have asked for a statement on the inter-governmental conference White Paper, and we still do not know when we shall have that.

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

Will the right hon. Lady tell us when the Second Reading of the Northern Ireland police Bill is likely to take place? She knows that there is considerable interest in the subject in all parties.

Although the right hon. Lady responded positively to requests for a debate on long-term care, we have not yet had an opportunity to discover the Government's conclusions on that important subject. It has been raised this morning in the Adjournment debate as the Parliamentary Secretary knows. We should be grateful for a statement in the near future.

The right hon. Lady has admitted several times that, with the reversion of the Budget to the old date, the pattern for economic debates is not satisfactory. When is she likely to present proposals for regularly spaced debates on the economy and public expenditure?

Is the right hon. Lady any nearer being able to propose a proper pattern of sittings for the whole year? I ask that not because of my concern about the precise dates of recesses but because the staff the House are anxious to know them. She might know that the Doorkeepers open golf tournament takes place on 2 August. I have been approached this morning and asked whether that will have to be cancelled. Perhaps we could be given some idea about the pattern for the rest of this year.

I wish the right hon. Lady a happy Easter.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) and return his good wishes for Easter to him and the House.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point about making the business statement at the beginning or the end of proceedings under today's circumstances. We thought that sticking to our usual slot, even on a Friday pattern sitting, would be for the convenience of the House. However, I note his remarks.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe. It causes great anxiety in all parties. I shall draw his remarks to the attention of the Foreign Secretary, who will do his utmost to keep the House informed. The hon. Gentleman specifically asked whether we could make a statement on 2 May. The Commonwealth ministerial action group is meeting on 2 and 3 May—I fear that I cannot recall the location—and the Foreign Secretary will attend it. His attendance might be incompatible with making a statement to the House. However, I am sure that the Foreign Secretary wants to keep the House informed.

I cannot provide dates for the intergovernmental conference White Paper debate, Second Reading of the Northern Ireland police Bill or a debate on the Government's conclusions on long-term care. On the latter, I shall draw the remarks of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me that as yet we have no settled pattern for economic debates. We shall reconsider that. On more certainty about when the House is likely to sit during the year, I am pleased to hear an Opposition Member expressing anxiety about the impact of our decisions on the staff of the House. That is sometimes overlooked. I take his point about unpredictability. That is one of the reasons for the Modernisation Committee's recommendation, following the Jopling committee recommendation, of greater use of motions for programming the discussion of our debates. Such motions are likely to promote better discussion of issues in Government proposals that hon. Members in all parties identify as important and also because the lack of such agreements contributes to the unpredictability and uncertainty to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

I omitted to provide some information. Last week, I said that there would be a debate on a Select Committee report in Westminster Hall on 11 May. We now know that it will be the second report this Session of the Select Committee on Science and Technology on engineering and physical sciences-based innovation.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): When I hear Opposition spokesmen refer to patterns of sittings, I start to worry. It is as if the Opposition are trying to fix the business.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): They will be asking for guillotines next.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The unpredictability and uncertainty in the House strengthens it and makes the institution what it is.

Is there any news on our annual debate on the Intelligence and Security Committee report?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot provide a date for that debate, but I bear in mind the pressure to hold it. Of course, I take my hon. Friend's point about the anxiety that he and other long-serving Members feel when the Opposition seek a more predictable pattern of debates that they are trying to create difficulties in the Government's handling of business. However, there is merit in reaching common-sense agreements so that important issues can be aired and the House has an opportunity to scrutinise them. I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) say sotto voce that the Opposition will be calling for guillotines next. He will remember that the Leader of the Opposition did that not long ago.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): While we all welcome the fact that the Government try to give notice of business several weeks in advance, what is the rationale for changing the business for Thursday 4 May, which is an important date for many hon. Members? The change has caused some confusion. A debate was supposed to be held on the Wakeham report on the reform of the House of Lords. Many hon. Members intended to give up the chance to meet their electorate to be present at that debate. However, the business has been changed to a debate on defence. That means that those who had to be in their constituencies have to change their arrangements. Many hon. Members, including members of the Select Committee on Defence, will find it difficult to be present on that day. Why has that change been made?

We endorse the views of the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) on Zimbabwe. As the Leader of the House pointed out, our return will coincide with a meeting of the Commonwealth leaders. I hope that there will be an early report to the House about what action the Commonwealth can take, hopefully under British leadership, to deal with the deteriorating situation.

I endorse the views of not only the hon. Member for South Staffordshire but many other hon. Members about the need for a Government statement as soon as possible on long-term care for the elderly. Many hon. Members have expressed that view over several weeks.

Finally, I endorse the view that we should wish each other a happy Easter.

Mrs. Beckett: I of course understand that, whenever we change the provisional business that has been announced, there are always as many complaints as there are congratulations. I understand that doing so can create difficulties for Members, and of course understand the point about the Defence Committee.

The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that several defence debates are scheduled. We strive to accommodate the concerns of the Defence Committee, which include, for example, providing timely debates following completion of its reports and so on. However, there are occasions on which, unfortunately, we cannot accommodate all its requests.

I of course take the hon. Gentleman's point about the debate scheduled for 4 May. I am not entirely sure—this is not a criticism—that he was with us for lasts week's business statement. If he was, he will recall that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), the Opposition spokesman, specifically asked us not to stage the House of Lords reform debate on 4 May—indeed, a number of Members expressed that view—because, although all the issues that we debate are of importance, and we would not find time for them on the Floor of the House if they were not, there is a feeling that the debate is a matter of considerable constitutional import and many Members, who otherwise might be engaged on local election day, wish to take part in it.

I note, too, the hon. Gentleman's remarks about Members having been prepared to give up the chance to meet their electorate. I am sure that they are now even more happy that they will not need to make that sacrifice. I also take on board his remarks about both Zimbabwe and long-term care.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Will my right hon. Friend take on board the widespread interest in the Government's new policy planning guidance note 6, which will help protect the green belt? However, does she recognise the concern that we are still hamstrung by the structure and other plans that, in some cases, were made many years ago? Will she try to schedule a debate on those issues in the reasonably near future, perhaps combining consideration of the Government's forthcoming White Papers on urban and rural planning, and response to the Rogers report?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, especially as he ties in other documents with his proposal for an examination of such issues. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for such a debate on the Floor. He might find a debate in Westminster Hall a more fruitful opportunity. However, I certainly take on board his point about several issues coming together.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the pressure on the House's business, but join those who are calling for a major debate on foreign affairs. Although I also appreciate concerns about Zimbabwe, there is an even greater tragedy in Ethiopia. May we have an opportunity to see how we as a people are pressing the world to help that situation?

I also join those who are expressing season's greetings. I hope that we might all enter into the wonder and mystery of Good Friday and the thrilling joy of Easter day.

Mrs. Beckett: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as I know is the whole House. I certainly take on board his point about the number of foreign affairs issues that are arising. I shall endeavour to raise that matter with the Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be aware of the ease of travelling on our roads during the Easter school holidays. In the light of such ease when parents are not driving their children to school, will she find time for a debate on home-to-school transport provision?

Mrs. Beckett: Again, I recommend Westminster Hall. I entirely take my hon. Friend's point about the contrast. I saw an interesting description the other day of something that is called a walking bus, which gathers school children to take them to school. That is thought to be conducive to safety and to easing parents' fears. I know that some experiments are being undertaken, but I fear that it is unlikely that I shall find time in the near future for such a debate on the Floor of the House.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I, too, wish the right hon. Lady and her husband a happy Easter, although I feel sure that they will both sorely miss the company of right hon. and hon. Members.

When will we have the delayed but important annual debate on small businesses—a matter of great concern to them, as they constitute 99.6 per cent. of all British enterprises, employ approximately half of the private sector work force and contribute two fifths of our national output?

May we have as early as possible a further statement on progress in the proposed appointment of the chairman of the Appointments Commission, on which the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office had a few words to say on Tuesday afternoon? I hope that nominations have not yet closed, though the appointment is to be made very soon. Does the Leader of the House agree that, in view of the importance of that person being characterised by experience, impartiality and a spirit of public service, one outstanding candidate for the post would be my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)? I hope that she will undertake vigorously to lobby on his behalf.

Mrs. Beckett: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I am sorry and surprised that, uncharacteristically, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is not present.

Mr. Skinner: It is his day off.

Mrs. Beckett: Perhaps he is having a day off, which makes a change.

[Mrs. Beckett]

There is a slight inconsistency in the comments of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) about the Appointments Commission. On one hand, he hopes that nominations are not closed, but on the other, that there is an early announcement. Those statements seem not to be mutually compatible. However, I anticipate that an announcement will be made very soon.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for entering the caveat that a debate on small businesses is not an assured annual event, although the Government endeavour to find a regular, suitable opportunity for one. I say that only because, as he will know, one does not have to be in this Chamber for very long, listening to Members calling for annual debates on a variety of burning issues, to realise that we would never do anything if we agreed to all such requests.

It is difficult to tear oneself away from this place. We shall definitely miss right hon. and hon. Members, but we shall just have to steel ourselves.

Adjournment (Easter)

Question again proposed, That this House do now adjourn.

11.17 am

Mr. Swayne: I shall attempt to draw my remarks to a close as I see that other hon. Members wish to speak.

The view of the secular state of the New Testament is very much one of grudging tolerance—render to Caesar that which is Caesar's. The view that we have expressed in our coronation service is much more intimate: of priest and king intimately connected by the anointing of oil and the consecration of the monarch. The monarch reigns not only by the grace of God, but with the blessing of God and is defender of the faith. I suggest that such an image is not open to amendment as Professor Weller would have us believe.

I say in passing that the communion service has been an integral part of the coronation service from the outset. The only monarch who avoided it was James II, and we all know what became of him. I argue that any attempt to include, as Professor Weller appears to require, the active participation in the act of acclamation by other faiths would undermine the fundamental of the principal faith—the first commandment.

There is an entirely proper argument to be had about an entirely secular state that is devoid of religious trappings, but we should not go down the road of unravelling our religious settlement by accident or by trying to change its nature, thereby ending up with a coronation service not dissimilar to the political correctness that characterised the opening of the millennium dome.

11.19 am

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): It is with some pleasure that I follow the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). At first I thought that he was wise to move from debating the internet to constitutional history, but his circumlocution began to make that subject an even bigger risk than the first. I intend to be very much safer and, as would be expected of most hon. Members, say a few unkind words about Barclays bank. The matter has been well covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar)—I do not propose to go over the same ground again—and parallel points were made by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath).

There is a natural interrelationship between banks and post offices in rural areas. Barclays is currently running an advertising campaign using fairly expensive actors, and I understand that its slogan is, "A big bank for a big world". One fears that that may become, "Only one bank for the whole world". Barclays has been singled out as the major culprit, but it is only third in the league table of infamy, as the NatWest bank and Lloyds TSB have closed more branches.

Barclays has suffered from a lack of good public relations, but, most of all, the banks have all suffered from a lack of any form of community spirit. That problem is endemic to modern society and businesses have changed character rapidly. Many, however large, were family run, or run by an employer who lived in the community, close to or alongside his work force. He was bonded to that

community through direct terms of employment, knowing his work force socially and performing acts of benevolence for that community. All that has been swept away over a short period.

The connection between the business community and the local community has gone. We see that on a vast scale with Rover, whose owners are dismissing a country just as Barclays is dismissing villages. Governments of a democratic persuasion throughout the world sometimes need to put their nationalist tendencies aside, and we may have a lot more in common with the Governments of France, Germany and Italy than with large corporations that flit from one country to another, to the disadvantage of the inhabitants of all of them.

I want to raise another subject that has been visited often and would do so with an even greater tremor were my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) still present. I must declare an interest as a solicitor before I discuss magistrates courts. Like all hon. Members, I fear that there will be further waves of closures. The county of Essex suffered that fate in early 1998 and, as each month goes by, other counties end up in the same position.

The appeal ratio is interesting, and the fees of a lawyer appealing on behalf of magistrates courts would not be large, as the success rate is remarkably small. There were only two successful appeals under the Conservative Administration, and I suppose that the Government would say that they are twice as good because over the past three years there have been four successes in 48 cases.

Again, the problem is the divorce between democracy and the functions of government. Formerly, the magistrates courts were administered by a committee of the county council, whose members are subject to the wonderful invention—if one might put it that way—of having to be elected. That stimulates the mind, as one has to listen to what the people in one's community have to say. That, of course, does not apply to chief executives of health authorities or to members of health trusts or magistrates courts committees. They do not have to be elected and can act as they will until discharged, when they receive a large settlement.

We are missing the whole point about magistrates courts and their place in the community. I have in my hand a document, issued by the Central Council of Magistrates Courts Committees, that is tragically early 21st century. The words "central council" have an almost Stalinist ring about them and represent the incredible mixture of communism and capitalism that we have these days, which is called corporate finance. The document is entitled "Good Practice Guide on Courthouse Closure", but the very idea of using a good practice guide to close something down is beyond me.

Decisions are made according to "criteria", which is one of the words that I never want to hear again. Criteria are a straitjacket—a device for coming to the conclusion that the decider had reached in the first instance. The arguments for closing magistrates courts, which have been well rehearsed by hon. Members, are that there is concern about facilities and that the disabled sometimes cannot climb the steps to the courthouse. Magistrates courts solve that problem by making the disabled travel 20 miles to court rather than using the nearest courthouse. Another argument is that witnesses and defendants need to be separated, but the point was well made in a recent debate that they would travel home on the same bus to that far-distant village after the case.

When one judges whether institutions should remain open, one must try to sense the spirit of what one is trying to do. Magistrates courts administer justice with the benefit of local knowledge, in the spirit of the communities in which they are set. That is best achieved when magistrates come from a defined and relatively small area, sit in a courthouse in that area and judge people and situations of which they have long and extensive knowledge. None the less, the pace of contraction in the county of Essex, as elsewhere, has been rapid.

I used to appear regularly in a small two-room courthouse in Southminster on the Dengie marshes, where the interviews took place in the car park. The spirit there was as it should be. The magistrates knew everything about the locality, and probably everything about the defendants as well, especially when they faced the antique Essex charge of going in search of coneys—I suppose that we would call it rabbit poaching—for which people were prosecuted on the Dengie marshes until the early 1980s. That courthouse has closed. Local people who have to attend court now get a train from Southminster to Wickford and change for Shenfield, where they change again and catch a train to Witham in my constituency. I suspect that that court, too, may be scheduled for closure.

When King Solomon made his judgment he did not pick up a book entitled, "The Best Practice Guide to Dividing Babies"; nor did he make his decision according to the appropriate criteria. He had a sense of justice and what was right. The sooner we move away from good practice, supposed quality assurance, transparencies and all the other gobbledegook of managerial tyranny, the better. We may then be able to retrieve the sense of justice in our local communities.

11.29 am

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Today, we have a good opportunity to consider some important constituency matters before the Easter Adjournment. When I tell people that I represent Shipley, near Bradford in West Yorkshire, the image of the semi-rural part of my constituency—the leafy suburbs—often comes to mind. However, east Shipley, which is a disadvantaged corner of my area, is less well off than many areas of Bradford and many important issues need to be tackled. East Shipley contains the neighbourhoods of Windhill, Bolton Woods, Wrose, Owlet, central Shipley and parts of Saltaire. There are areas of high unemployment and difficulties caused by poor housing. We need to examine ways in which we can begin to share the prosperity and economic growth that is now emerging in all parts of our community. I am keen to see Shipley East share in that growing prosperity.

Much has been done by the Government to help Shipley East, including the national minimum wage, the new deal for the unemployed, the working families tax credit and the increases in child benefit. That money will bring greatest benefit to many of its residents, and I am pleased to see that the changes are beginning to have a significant effect. Unemployment there is dropping, although not as much as I should like. In particular, youth unemployment has fallen markedly, as has long-term unemployment, as experienced by those who have been unemployed for more than a year.

We have a high pensioner population in Shipley East, and I am pleased that the Government have been able to make a start in targeting those who are less well off, through

[Mr. Christopher Leslie]

the minimum income guarantee, the free television licence for the over-75s, which will be introduced shortly, and the £150 winter allowance. However, there is more to do.

We have done a lot. When I was a member of Bradford council, before I became a Member of Parliament, we managed to introduce several significant regeneration schemes in Shipley East. We retained its objective 2 area status, and obtained matched funds from the European Union to set against local public funds. We managed to lever £1 million out of objective 2 status, which was matched with another £1 million, and that money has brought significant benefits. For example, we have a scheme to increase information and communication technology learning—Shipley Communities Online. We have child care facility schemes, such as the Jumping Jacks scheme at Bolton Woods. Several other projects have started, thanks to other Government initiatives, such as the health action zone. We are working on developing a healthy living centre in Shipley East.

Several small but important ideas have helped to rebuild confidence and economic prosperity in the Shipley East community. They all add up to a comprehensive plan for regeneration and include small projects such as tree planting and road resurfacing. For example, Festival avenue is having a new road constructed, and £85,000 has been spent on bus shelters and new litter bins. Small things like that make a difference in improving the infrastructure of a less well-off community.

Through careful planning, we have also managed to secure a retail development at Low Well and significant industrial and job creation opportunities at Fox Corner in Shipley. I have worked hard, together with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to try to get world heritage status for Saltaire, part of which is in Shipley East, and we are making good progress.

Some major issues have been controversial locally and have required sensitive consideration. One example is school reorganisation. East Shipley, like the rest of Bradford, has had a three-tier system for many years, with first, middle and upper schools, but we are now moving to the primary and secondary model prevalent across the country. That has been a difficult process with several schools having to close. However, from such ends come new beginnings and, although we were unsuccessful in persuading the council to site a new secondary school at the location of Wood End middle school, we have managed to obtain important new investment in Salt grammar school, the Frizinghall challenge school and Immanuel college. Many new classrooms, teaching facilities, sports facilities and other important education provisions will bring great benefits to the children of Shipley East.

Most important in many ways has been the focus on housing and tackling the poor quality of social and council housing in Shipley East. I am pleased that the council has been able to secure £1 million of new investment this year to refurbish many estates and improve, repair and re-roof many properties that were in a dilapidated state. For example, the old flats on Gaisby Lane have been demolished and new houses are being built as I speak. That is a tangible example of the delivery of a regenerated community in a poorer area.

Some successful local community organisations have made good progress, such as Windhill community centre, with its Windhill futures project. Kath Quinn and others are doing a great job in developing plans for the future. At Wrose community centre, Bob Lee and others are working hard to bring the neighbourhood together, and at Bolton Woods community centre, Tony Miller, who is also a local councillor for Shipley East, is working hard on several projects, including the information technology learning scheme that I mentioned earlier. I pay tribute to the local councillors for Shipley East, Mark Blackburn, Phil Thornton and Tony Miller, who do a lot of good work, sometimes unsung.

Much has been done in Shipley East, but there is much more to do. I must emphasise the need for housing regeneration. One corner of Windhill—Wood End crescent—is particularly deprived. It has a very dilapidated estate of three and four-storey blocks of flats that are derelict and crumbling. They are half-empty because nobody wants to live there. I fear that they may be beyond saving and we will need to consider rehousing the few remaining residents. We should also consider flattening those properties and building new social housing on Wood End crescent estate. I have spoken to the council's chair of housing, Jim O'Neill, and the city housing officer, Geraldine Howley. They toured the estate with me, and we have a plan to make progress by June towards funding new housing on that site.

We have delivered a lot in Shipley East, but there is more to do. As a Labour party, under a Labour Government, we will get there.

11.39 am

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): I was not here at 9.30 am and I did not think that I would be recognised, so I have not written anything down. It is no use sending me little envelopes, because I will not know exactly what I have ended up saying. I am a member of the Council of Europe and in January we had a debate about Chechnya. Many right hon. and hon. Members from this House and colleagues from the other place contributed to that excellent debate. We made several proposals to which we believed the Government of Russia should adhere and said that we would revisit the issue in April to see whether any progress had been made. However, not much progress was made, and there have been enormous human rights violations in Chechnya. These matters have been discussed by the Prime Minister and the new president of Russia, Mr. Putin.

In the context of the Council of Europe, there are other nations with poor human rights records. I wish to refer to Turkey, a nation with phenomenal human rights problems. It has other problems, such as the divided Cyprus on which there have been a large number of UN resolutions, none of which Turkey has adhered to. There is the Ilisu dam, into which we are potentially putting £200 million which will flood many of the historical areas of the Kurdish people. We have had the Loizidou case, which is now nearly 20 months old, on which Turkey is not listening to the European Court of Human Rights.

The main issue is the human rights violations by Turkey, its military and Government, against the Kurdish people. I have always been amazed that we have no Kurdish representatives on the Council of Europe, the Western European Union, the Organisation for Security

and Co-operation in Europe, NATO or any of the international bodies, despite the fact that a large percentage of the population of Turkey is Kurdish. We must ask why there is no fair representation of the Kurdish people.

The PKK, depending on where one stands, is either a terrorist organisation or a group of freedom fighters. However, it has come up with new plans for peace, to which the Turkish Government have not reacted. I would argue that the PKK should no longer be seen as a terrorist organisation. We have been willing in other parts of the world to start discussions with organisations that may have been terrorist in the past. If we could start discussions with the PKK, it would be a good step for stability in that part of southern Europe and the middle east.

The PKK's peace plans were sent to the Foreign Office, where officials said that the plans were wonderful, but that they could go no further because the PKK was a terrorist organisation. Perhaps the Foreign Office could examine those plans again and build bridges with the political wing of the PKK to help the peace process in Turkey for the Kurdish people.

11.44 am

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): First, I associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) and for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), who have done us a service in highlighting the continuing concern about bank closures. I am committed to the idea of a community reinvestment Act, requiring banking and financial services providers to disclose their level of investment in areas of deprivation.

The social exclusion unit report, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East referred, highlighted the inadequacy of voluntary disclosure by banks. I am not convinced that that voluntary approach will work, but I await with interest a Bank of England report on the subject which is due shortly.

I want to concentrate on a specific local issue and highlight the need to expand intensive care and high-dependency unit facilities within my local NHS trust. These facilities are crucial at district general hospitals, and help to ensure safe clinical care and to improve the entire patient care process within hospitals. They help also to minimise treatment delays.

Northwick Park and St. Marks hospital—which sits just in the borough of Brent, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner)—serves my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty). In the run-up to the last general election, the previous Government closed the accident and emergency units at Mount Vernon hospital and Edgware general hospital—at a stroke closing two thirds of the accident and emergency provision that had served constituents in Harrow.

The decisions marked the end of Mount Vernon hospital's time as a district general hospital. That move continues to be resented deeply by my constituents—not least because it has led to recent decisions to shift the regional specialties in burns, plastics and oral-maxillofacial surgery off the Mount Vernon hospital site to Northwick Park hospital.

I wish to praise the considerable work and effort of the Pinner Association, the Hatch End Association and Community Voice who, between them, collected more than 80,000 signatures against the initial proposal to shift burns and plastics services to Chelsea and Westminster hospital, well out of the local area. Having that scale of support makes meetings with local health decision makers more productive. The news last year that we had finally secured the burns and plastics unit at Northwick Park hospital, with much better access for Harrow residents, has been welcomed—albeit reluctantly, because the move from Mount Vernon was required.

Northwick Park and St. Mark's hospital merged with Central Middlesex hospital in April last year to create the North-West London Hospitals NHS trust. As well as bringing in new management, the merger means that the trust is now the biggest provider of acute care in north-west London. I am delighted that the accident and emergency unit is benefiting from the Government's casualty modernisation scheme, with a £2.2 million refit due to be completed by autumn this year.

With the transfer of burns, plastics and oral-maxillofacial services from Mount Vernon, Northwick Park hospital is set to expand further. That will increase the pressures on intensive care and for proper high-dependency unit provision. Northwick Park hospital is the largest hospital in the trust. It currently has some six intensive treatment beds, and no high-dependency facilities at all. The existing facilities are not adequate to meet local demand and need urgent redevelopment and expansion.

The ITU facilities at Northwick Park are co-located with the theatre complex, with six ITU beds backing on to theatre recovery. There are options for fast-track and relatively inexpensive expansion of the existing area, which would meet the immediate needs of the local population. There is space to add two beds capable of use either as ITU or HDU beds, plus space for a further four HDU beds. That would be achieved through the conversion of areas at the heart of the current ITU department. At present, they are used for offices and laboratories, which could be relocated to the hospital's basement.

The overall fabric of the ITU facility at Northwick Park hospital is good, and recent refurbishment means that the proposed conversion could be completed quickly and at a relatively low capital cost. In addition, I am told that there has been a proposal to add four HDU beds to the medical assessment unit if funding is available. That would incur no capital building costs, although there would be some equipment and recurrent costs.

The other crucial ingredient in the successful expansion of intensive care and high dependency unit provision is the staffing needs of those facilities. The intensive care areas in the North West London Hospitals NHS trust are fully staffed, with both trained and untrained nurses. Recruitment and retention of nursing staff in intensive care has been problematic nationally, but the trust is especially proud of its record of attracting and retaining trained intensive care nursing staff. Each site consistently attracts a high level of interest when new jobs are advertised. No problems are anticipated in recruiting staff if additional beds can be opened.

One of the reasons for the success enjoyed by both hospitals in retaining staff is the flexible approach that they take to intensive-care nursing, together with their

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commitment to proper training and education. At Northwick Park hospital, key theatre recovery staff are intensive-care trained. Within that innovative model, the group of nurses works as part of a team with the ITU staff, and they led a pilot project on high dependency care last winter.

It is likely that there will be increased demand for intensive care services. The trust has a full staff complement on each of its two sites. It—and Northwick Park hospital in particular—is extremely well placed to open additional ITU and high-dependency unit beds to cope with that expected increase in demand.

The trust has assured me that it will continue to develop innovative staffing solutions, which may offer lessons for the wider national health service and contribute to the development of ITU and high-dependency services across the capital. At Northwick Park hospital, there is now an urgent need to expand the intensive treatment unit to meet that local demand, and to open high-dependency beds to improve the patient care process. Investment in that facility would offer a long-term benefit to the local health economy.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will encourage a swift and positive response from Ministers and officials in the Department of Health.

11.51 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to take part in this debate. I would have liked to talk about my idea for a new deal for pensioners, and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) could have persuaded me to explore the rural dimension, but perhaps he would enjoy reading the rural manifesto launched by Labour Members this week. However, both *The Independent* and Conservative Front-Bench Members decided to concentrate on what that manifesto did not contain rather than on what it did. That is unfortunately what happens to modern politicians, but we certainly did not say that we wanted to build excessive numbers of houses in the green belt, as they maintained.

I have two brief points to raise with my hon. Friend the Minister, and a third that I would like to cover in slightly more detail.

We have heard a lot recently about the future of British Nuclear Fuels plc, and the current proposals were aired last week. It is important to understand that Sellafield is not the whole of BNFL, and that BNFL is not the whole of the nuclear industry. There is an important plant at Berkeley in my constituency, where some of the brightest brains in the country work on the Magnox reactors. There is also great investment in ideas for the future, and it is about time that the House held a proper debate on nuclear energy.

The announcement on electricity supply made last Monday was very important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) will agree, but we cannot ignore the other elements in that supply. I hope that all the negative publicity associated with BNFL could be put in the context of how we want to progress. For all sorts of reasons, we need people to go into this important industry, either to clean it up or to explore future developments in power generation.

My second brief point concerns the sale of land by the British Railways Board, which affects the constituencies of many hon. Members. I have a particular interest in the matter, because there is a proposal for a land sale at the Stonehouse site on Bristol road in my constituency. With the help of the county council those opposed to the sale have managed to delay it until a proper investigation has been held.

I have written to the British Railways Board, the shadow Strategic Rail Authority and the rail companies about the matter. I have also raised the matter in questions to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The process is rather byzantine, and I feel that there should be a presumption against sale where there is a potential to bring sites back into use, as is no doubt the case with the Stonehouse site. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take that message forward. It is all well and good to talk about the benefits of bringing money into the Treasury, but it is more important that we consider the potential for integrated use of not only rail transport but all public transport.

The main issue that I want to raise is of constituency interest but also some national interest. In many respects, home improvement agencies are a good news story for the Government. We have done an awful lot to extend work on improving homes through the home energy efficiency scheme and more recently—it is a pity that the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) is not in his place—with the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Bill. The Bill has been accepted by the Government and has reached Report stage and we hope that it will receive all-party support. The Bill is an important statement. As always, one could call for more detail and an even more advanced strategy to achieve what we all want, which is to help people who live in poverty and cannot heat their houses.

I declare an interest as a trustee of the Care and Repair agency in Stroud. The reason why I raise the issue at this time is that, although it is a good news story, some hon. Members—I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has a constituency interest in it—were disappointed that, having set up bureaux in different areas, the Government did not re-award the contract to Care and Repair. The co-ordinating body was run by Care and Repair England. The body was originally set up by Shelter and other agencies that are active in the field such as Age Concern, Anchor Trust, and so on.

Care and Repair lost the contract to fulfil the national co-ordinating role in January this year. That was disappointing in a number of respects. The agency felt that it had done a perfectly good job. It had civil servants sitting on its board. All the reports that came back to it said that it was doing a good job. Last year, it received a grant of £423,000, which was money well spent. It has always argued that the grant did not cover the work that it did so it had to find other ways of funding its work. Having done the work, one would have thought that Care and Repair had a fair chance of having the contract awarded a second time.

I know that the Audit Commission was unhappy that the first contract was awarded to Care and Repair England, but it is the national co-ordinating body. It is the parent body of all the agencies and it works closely with other bodies such as Anchor Trust. The sad thing was that Care and Repair was not re-awarded the contract. I have

been trying to get to the bottom of that. I have written a number of letters to my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning. I know that he was ill when the contract was awarded to Collective Enterprises Ltd. I cast no aspersions on that organisation, but we are looking for a further extension of the number of bureaux, and Care and Repair England had that under way.

Care and Repair has a good reputation for advice and working with the different bureaux, yet it lost the contract supposedly because it put in too high a bid. That may or may not be the case, but the problem was that it was apparently given the wink by people close to the Ministry to go for a realistic bid in terms of what it costs properly to co-ordinate home improvement agencies. Yet as a result of putting in that bid, it did not get the contract. I hope that there is a case for taking forward the issue with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions because the matter has left a bitter taste in the mouth of the agencies.

If we have a good news story, we should know what is going on and how matters are handled. They are important. Care and Repair has done an awful lot of good work. I have spoken before about the value of the organisation, and justice must not only be done but be seen to be done.

11.59 am

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): An interesting thread has run through the debate; that does not always happen on these occasions. The subjects of health, food and rural life have predominated; almost all hon. Members made some reference to them.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) referred to the Health and Safety Executive. The hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) told us about the threat to the Royal hospital Haslar. The hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) spoke about chronic bronchitis among former miners. I very much endorse his point about the need to keep such issues out of the hands of lawyers—with all due respect to the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), who subsequently confessed his membership of that profession. I am only too aware that sufferers from organophosphate poisoning have experienced similar difficulties with compensation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) referred to concerns in rural areas—to which I shall return in a moment—that are echoed throughout the country. The hon. Members for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) and for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) talked about banks that were pulling out of their responsibilities to rural areas.

I thought that the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) would not fit into my pattern, but he did because he was concerned about breast-screening services. That matter is most important to several hon. Members.

Similarly, I thought that the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) might disappear into another subject. However, when he engaged with the effect of internet pornography, from which he was saved by the Division Bell—I always wondered about the origin of that expression—it became clear that such practices could have an unsettling effect on the mental balance of those who indulge in them. That too is a health issue.

I endorse every word said by the hon. Member for Braintree on the fact that magistrates courts committees throughout the country—including my area of Devon and Cornwall—seem to be out of touch with real life. I was delighted to hear a solicitor making those points. I hope that, as a result of the hon. Gentleman's advocacy, the Lord Chancellor will take the Book of Solomon home for the Easter recess rather than the criteria of the central council.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) made an important connection between healthy living and poverty and housing. I was pleased to hear that there is a healthy living centre in his area. I wish that they existed in all our areas.

The hon. Member for Harrow, West spoke about intensive care. That is a growing problem, not only in central London but throughout the country.

I have great difficulty in dissenting from anything said by the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). I wish he would be more controversial. He always picks on Liberal Democrat policies and endorses them. However, I strongly agree with him on the connection between warm homes and health; it is extremely important and I am glad that, together, we are making some progress on that matter.

I want to add to the themes of nutrition and health—issues to which we do not pay sufficient attention. There are three related issues. The first is the continuing threat to smaller, specialist, top-quality food producers, processors and retailers.

The second is the organic sector, about which I have a special concern. Consumer demand is increasing rapidly, but three quarters of the organic produce on supermarket shelves has to be imported—what a crazy situation.

Thirdly, there is the dairy sector, which includes many small family farms. They have been hit disproportionately hard by BSE, by the structural changes in milk marketing in recent years and by the uncompetitive level of the pound. Weekly—even daily—my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome and I share the experience of talking to dairy farmers who are in a desperately difficult situation.

That was why I was pleased to read the report, published on 24 January, of the Select Committee on Agriculture on the marketing of milk. A few days ago, the Government published their reply to that Committee, from which, sadly, it is evident to every Member who represents an agricultural area that the Select Committee is far closer than the Government to the real life—the grass roots—of the dairy sector. The Government are substantially out of touch.

This sector, and those who process and retail its products, are hit by too many regulations. They encounter a lack of flexibility, of discretion and of common sense in those who are given responsibility for implementing those regulations.

Just as the specialist cheesemakers are particularly badly hit by that situation, so are the low throughput abattoirs. In that area, our continental competitors have a considerable edge over us, because they recognise the need to differentiate according to size between the different organisations involved in the food process, and they, with their artisan or craftsman status and with derogation, manage to ensure that the smaller producer or processor is given a quite different set of regulations. In

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

Britain, that simply is not the case. We must persuade our Ministers, from all parts of the United Kingdom, to follow the example of the continent.

I have already mentioned a related issue—that of organic supply. At the National Farmers Union annual general meeting in February, the Prime Minister, in his speech, made the following absolutely explicit statement:

> Our plans envisage a trebling of the area under organic farming by 2006.

That means an increase from the current figure of 3 per cent. to 9 per cent. in that period. In my private Member's Bill, the Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill, we are looking slightly further ahead—to 2010. Many Members on both sides of the House, senior Members and those who have great expertise in that subject area, have backed the Bill. I am now looking to see not only whether the Government will live up to the Prime Minister's aspiration, promise, pledge or whatever it may be, but whether they will endorse my Bill. The content of a number of answers that I have received to parliamentary questions that I tabled in recent weeks do not give me much confidence that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has endorsed the Prime Minister's target, let alone my own.

Next, I return to the dairy sector. The Committee report is a very thorough document, as one would expect from one of the most important Select Committees of the House. It refers even to the detailed issues that were raised by the so-called Duckett's Cheese case in the county represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome, which I have mentioned before in the House. That case is alarming, because it seems that the hygiene police are being given additional powers and are not being in any way constrained, even though the case obviously has huge implications for the way in which we deal with problems relating to the sector.

The Prime Minister's summit at No. 10 Downing street to consider together all the issues surrounding the agricultural industry produced useful, stopgap, temporary remedies, but the long-term remedies are not in place.

The marketing strength of most of our farms in this country is far outweighed by that of the supermarkets and the big processors. Therefore it is a buyer's market, and we cannot deal with that problem until we identify the extent to which there is real competition and ascertain that those commercial giants are not using monopolistic powers—oligopolistic powers. At the moment, we are looking in vain to the Department of Trade and Industry and the Competition Commission for a fundamental and radical review.

Imports of dairy products are at an all-time high. That of course relates to the strength of the pound, and will not just go away. Everyone will be trooping back through the door of No. 10 next year unless something is done to address that problem.

Finally, I wish to discuss vertical integration. Under the previous Government's deeply regrettable legislation, which not only massacred the quite good system of milk marketing but made it very difficult for a producer co-operative to be effective in the sale of milk, there was the real risk that Milk Marque would not only be a puny child but might die in infancy—and so it has proved. We alone in the Agriculture Committee, against the opposition of the Labour party and of the then Conservative Government, argued that producers—the farmers—should be given more market power.

I hope that, at the very least, the Minister who is present today will give us an undertaking that the Committee report and the Government's response to it will be debated as soon as possible—preferably before the Whitsun recess. Perhaps he would use his best endeavours to ensure that such a debate takes place, in Westminster Hall at least.

12.9 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): In a debate of 14 speeches that has ranged from Wood End crescent in Shipley to Chechnya, I am not easily able to detect a common thread, although there were a number of subjects in common—among them, that raised by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler).

We are all grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the plight of farmers. Those of us who represent rural constituencies are acutely aware that all sectors of agriculture are under enormous pressure. We only have to look at the demonstration across in Parliament square to know just how acutely one sector is suffering, but every aspect of agriculture is under great pressure. Although it is of particular concern to hon. Members in rural seats, it is also of interest and concern to every hon. Member, because of the food that that industry provides.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Ms Jones) on her opening speech: her treatment of these debates is exemplary. I must not be too kind to her because if she were standing at the next general election, I would be doing my best to ensure that she did not get elected, but I deeply appreciate her exemplary manner in this House and as a neighbour. She rationed herself, as did the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis), to a five-minute speech, thus demonstrating that in five crisp minutes a topic can be dealt with adequately.

No hon. Member will cross swords with me when I say that the highlight of today's debate has been the return to vigorous and healthy form of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). We missed him in the last two of these Adjournment debates and we are glad that he is restored to health. He demonstrated in his own inimitable way just how a subject can and should be pursued. Although like the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), I could not necessarily associate myself with all the castigations of solicitors that he poured out today, he made some extremely valuable and cogent points.

Mr. Skinner: Fly-by-night solicitors.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Yes, the hon. Gentleman talked about fly-by-night solicitors: some do exist, and we all know about them. He made some trenchant points and we were glad to have his contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) demonstrates that he has earned a long service and a good conduct medal for the way in which he has conducted the campaign for Haslar hospital. He now deserves the Victory Cross because, by highlighting to the House the importance of the hospital, he has shown how crucial it is not only to his constituency but to the services in general that it should be retained. At the beginning of February, I happened to be in Gibraltar on a Royal Fleet Auxiliary

vessel. I asked some of the people who were running the hospital on the ship, "Is my hon. Friend overstating the case?" They said, "Most certainly he is not. We are extremely grateful to him and we very much hope that he will succeed." So do I.

We had an interesting speech from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). He has been in the forefront of those who have talked about the plight of rural post offices. The House has addressed the subject on a number of occasions and, I think, will do so again. Like the hon. Gentleman, I welcome the halting progress that has been made, but there is much more to be done before postmasters and mistresses are reassured. Coming from a constituency with many of these post offices, which are the lifeblood of the local community and the real community centre, I know how vital it is that they should survive.

I know, too, how important it is that there should be a more equitable distribution of funding for individual pupils. The hon. Gentleman spoke about Somerset. I have not been able to leave my place to check this, but I think that Staffordshire is even worse off.

Mr. David Heath *indicated assent.*

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Gentleman acknowledges that. This is an important point. Those of us who represent areas where children receive so much less per head than children in the home counties find the logic difficult to comprehend and the fairness impossible to comprehend. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Bolsover talks about the Tories. I have agitated on this issue on behalf of Staffordshire under successive Governments. We have not got the formula right. The Labour Government have now been in power for three years and it is time that they got the formula right. We very much hope that they will.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) talked about banks. I have to be a little careful in my response to his argument, because I might provoke the Minister into saying something similar to what a junior Minister said a couple of weeks ago; he earned himself a firm slap on the wrist for doing so. However, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has made his own concerns clear, and he represents a constituency not a million miles from the hon. Gentleman's: indeed, it adjoins it. We all share those concerns. The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) was right to say that we should not just point the finger at Barclays: NatWest and Lloyds TSB have both closed more branches than Barclays. However, it behoves those who are in charge of our clearing banks to recognise that they have certain social obligations; that services need to be provided, particularly in rural areas; and that everything cannot be done on the internet or online.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) made another extraordinary omnibus speech of the kind with which he entertains the House regularly in Adjournment debates. He covered a variety of subjects, and I was glad that he referred to our former colleague the late Sir Stephen McAdden, whom I remember well. My hon. Friend made a powerful and eloquent plea for the breast cancer centre which was named after Sir Stephen's widow, who I understand still runs it. I hope that the Minister will respond positively on that, and to the other points that my hon. Friend made. I was amused that, when my hon. Friend spoke about crime, he cast himself in successive sentences as Mother Teresa and as Joe public. I think that he wears the mantle of the latter more easily than that of the former.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox)—I was going to say the hon. Member for Cyprus because he frequently refers to Cyprus—sent me a note to explain that he is chairing an important Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting at the moment. That is why he cannot be here. He used the debate, as he does so often, in a classic way to highlight a particular case.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) gave us a most interesting constitutional essay. All I would say to him is, "Don't let's tamper with the Act of Settlement." If a particular problem arises, it is within the competence of Parliament to deal with it when it arises. My hon. Friend talked about speed limits, and he also gave us a somewhat alarming account of how he was rescued from perdition by the Division bell. In doing that, he made it clear that there is real danger on the internet: that it is a point that we should all take very much to heart. Some us are perhaps mightily relieved that we no longer have young children who can play with these sets and call up the most extraordinarily grotesque images. It is a problem that the Government must tackle.

As well as dealing with the banks, the hon. Member for Braintree made a lovely side-swipe at managerial gobbledegook. I echo strongly what he said about that. We want good, plain speaking. The hon. Gentleman cited Solomon in the most exemplary fashion.

The hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) talked about the need for more intensive-care facilities in his constituency. Again, the highlighting of constituency cases and problems is what the debate is mainly about; it is right that he should have done that. I cannot respond with any knowledge about Harrow, West, but I hope that the Minister will relay the hon. Gentleman's points to Ministers in the appropriate Department.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) came to praise the Government in what I thought were rather extravagant terms. I wonder whether there are local elections in Shipley next month. If there are, he was obviously aiming for appropriate headlines in the "Shipley Gazette", or whatever it is called. His blushing acquiescence shows that I have hit the nail on the head.

The debate has once again illustrated that it is a very useful occasion for the House. It enables Members to raise a whole range of topics and to do so in a non-confrontational way and in a manner that allows the Opposition to respond and the Government to take on board their points. I hope that the Minister will do just that.

In fulfilling my part of the time bargain, which I always scrupulously seek to do, may I conclude by wishing you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister and all hon. Members a very happy Easter? It has been a long haul since Christmas; Easter this year is almost as late as it can conceivably be. Although I had my leg pulled by the Member for Bolsover—and quite justifiably so—when I talked about sitting patterns, a more structured parliamentary year would not be a bad thing for any of us.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) ended with a message.

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

which I heard clearly. Several hon. Members gave messages today which they asked me to pass on to my ministerial colleagues. Some did so politely, asking whether I could have a word with Ministers. Others were more extreme and asked me to knock a few heads together. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who always gets to the bottom of the matter, told me to poke a stick in an eye and pick up a few bricks.

Other hon. Members sent a message to their constituents, and I was particularly struck by the speech of the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers). He spoke movingly to the troops back home, if I may put it like that—the 22,000 troops whom he met on the march to save Royal hospital Haslar. I also suspected that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) was talking to the people back home in Saltaire, perhaps not because of the local elections, but to encourage his colleagues there.

Haslar hospital is important, and the hon. Member for Gosport, who has pursued the matter diligently, spoke authoritatively. He knows that the Government's position is that the defence side of the hospital is to close and move to Birmingham. There are problems in that, and I will convey his views to ministerial colleagues. The hon. Gentleman also knows that the plan is to open a new hospital for civilians in his area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) also talked about a hospital, Northwick Park, which, I am told, had a serious flu crisis over the winter. The staff coped remarkably well, and I understand that they have been encouraged by the millions of pounds of funding, which my hon. Friend mentioned, which is being given to the hospital's accident and emergency unit. He knows that this year the NHS budget is growing by 9 per cent. in real terms. His request for a high dependency unit, which is a cornerstone of a modern district hospital, has been heard, and I shall pass on his views.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South–West (Ms Jones) also raised health issues when she talked about health and safety. The Government's policy is clear: we want health and safety issues to become part of mainstream business. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover talked about the coal industry, and it is important that health and safety thinking permeates all business.

Small businesses may not have the necessary resources and expertise, and it is a key priority for the Government and the Health and Safety Commission to provide small firms with the help that they need to ensure the health and safety of their workers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South–West said, the commission is considering a revised strategy, which it will publish shortly. I shall ensure that her remarks are reported directly to the Health and Safety Executive. My hon. Friend talked about the importance of small business, as did other hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) mentioned a range of issues, including those relating to residential and nursing homes and employment agencies, which are very much small business issues. He also referred to the problems at the Lady McAdden breast centre in his constituency. That facility is supported by enormous local voluntary effort, and it is important that such provision has a healthy relationship with the mainstream NHS.

The hon. Gentleman also told us that he had a problem with cadets in his area. I understand that, as we speak, the Minister for the Armed Forces is helping to resolve the matter.

I am pleased to hear about the Palace theatre. I wondered whether the hon. Gentleman was to perform there.

Like the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), I was not sure whether he would be a Joe public figure in his performance, or more of a Mother Teresa figure.

The hon. Gentleman talked also about the need to tackle crime. He made strong points about doing practical things at local level, and contrasted that with strategies. The importance of the Government's policies is that strategies will be defined. Local policing plans will be drawn up that meet people's needs. There will be the opportunity to challenge the police. For example, we shall be able to challenge the chief constable of Essex if targets are not met.

Some of my hon. Friends talked not about small business but about the big business of the banks. It seems that, in some of their actions, the banks have treated customers with arrogance and contempt. It is important to nail that. I followed with interest the proceedings of the Select Committee on the Treasury earlier this week. There is a need to find new and better facilities. In a sense, the demand for better banking facilities, both in urban and in rural areas, is linked with what the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) said about rural areas. I shall send him a copy of the manifesto produced by the rural group of Labour Members. It is a well-written document, which I plagiarise from time to time; there are ideas that we can pinch from one another. I accept, however, that we shall have to work hard on some people.

I was interested in a remarkable new concept of small farming—the leisure dairy farm. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) talked about the needs of the farming industry and referred to regulations. We are over-regulated and we need to relieve the burden. I was interested in the point made by the hon. Members for Somerton and Frome and for North Cornwall about a retirement scheme. In principle, that would be a good way forward. The difficulty lies in working out a scheme which does not retire people out of the far end without drawing in new people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) talked about Care and Repair. I put on record my thanks to the staff, who have worked hard over many years. I know that my hon. Friend is pursuing the matter. As well as thanking the staff, let me express the hope that Collective Enterprises Ltd. delivers for elderly people.

I do not know how to describe the speech of the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). I thought that he was going to get us into trouble at various times. He talked about the need to reduce speed on the roads, which is important. He spoke also of changing the culture surrounding the public's attitude to speed. He referred to phone boxes, pornography and circumcision. I was pleased that he was saved by the bell. I am not sure whether we should quote the phrase from Macbeth about

the knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell. I was slightly concerned about the direction that the hon. Gentleman was taking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover spoke forcefully about an issue that is close to his heart and mine—putting money in miners' pockets. They have given their health and, in some instances, their life, to keep us warm. It is essential that the 100,000 ex-miners are compensated quickly. The sum might be £2 billion eventually, and £55 million has been paid out. My hon. Friend is right to say that we need to focus on solicitors and health professionals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley talked about regeneration. Saltaire should be a world heritage site; with his efforts, and those of his colleagues, I am sure that it is getting there.

My hon. Friends the Members for Tooting (Mr. Cox) and for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) talked about Cyprus, Turkey and the European Union. There is an opportunity, with applications for EU entry, to try to resolve some of the difficulties.

This has been an interesting debate. I am sure that we shall have a good Easter, even though some of us will be involved in election duties until 4 May. The comments made during today's speeches show how seriously we all take our constituents' interests.

It being half-past Twelve o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

PETITION

Rights of the Child

12.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am pleased to bring to the House a petition brought to me by two young people. It was organised by a organisation based in my constituency, Big Take, on behalf of the Oasis Trust, the Tear Fund, Youthwork magazine and the Jubilee Campaign. It comprises 278 signatures, mainly, although not entirely, those of young people who are, for the most part, from London, including many from my constituency who were organised by the Salvation Army Citadel at the Elephant and Castle. The petition relates to matters in which, most impressively, those young people have taken an interest.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons,

The Petition of the people in London.

Declares that Her Majesty's Government has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and is therefore committed to children's rights and therefore has a responsibility to do all it can to help end the exploitation of child labourers in overseas countries.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons should urge the Secretary of State for International development that all aid to countries such as Indonesia, India, Mali or Pakistan where child labour is known to be an extensive problem should have a reasonable percentage of the aid linked to a programme of education for the child labourers. And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

School Nurses

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

12.31 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I am grateful to the Chair for granting me this debate, just before we break for the Easter recess. The motivation for requesting it arose from visits to schools in my constituency, where I met teachers, head teachers and parents who are worried about the reduction in Kingston's local school nursing service. Having spoken to representatives of the health authority, I am aware that, last year, the service was cut back. A major review of the service has been carried out, but no decision has been taken. Meanwhile, the service is left in limbo and there are insufficient school nurses to serve the 20,000 children in Kingston's schools. That is a matter of deep concern.

I am aware of the broader issues and, in the desire to prevent the debate from becoming too parochial, I shall give my view of the importance of the role of the modern school nurse and how it fits in with Government policy. The days of Nitty Norah are long past. I remember lining up in the queue to have my hair checked with the head lice comb, but the school nursing service changed many years ago. Now, it is far more involved in real health screening, with highly skilled professionals delivering added value through the health care that they provide to schoolchildren.

School nurses conduct proper interviews to compile a profile of a school; they assess children for specific problems at different ages; and they run immunisation and vaccination programmes. They are in regular contact with schools, so that problems picked up by teachers can be referred to the school nurse. They help to ensure that vulnerable children and those on the child protection register can talk to a private and confidential ear. That counselling, listening and advocacy role is an often overlooked part of the school nurse's role.

Many school nurses run drop-in clinics, not only for schoolchildren, but for parents and teenagers outside school, in which they deal with issues ranging from mental health to sexual health. They run enuresis clinics and parenting programmes. School nurses play an essential part in health education and the promotion of healthy living. That sophisticated role should be recognised, developed and given proper investment.

The Government have recognised that in their documents "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation" and "Making a Difference", which specifically refer to the role of the school nurse. It fits well with the health improvement programme, sure start and the healthier schools initiative. That role could play a key part in the way in which primary care groups and trusts deal with public health policy.

"Making a Difference", which was published in July 1999, states:

We need to develop the public health role of the school nurse too, building on the opportunities their contact with children and young people provide.

I therefore acknowledge and put on record the fact that the Government say the right things. When they develop their forthcoming policy on sexual education and sexual health—the Minister may want to refer to that—I hope that they put school nurses at its centre.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

The need for early detection of special educational needs is part of public policy. Do the Government provide sufficient guidelines to health authorities? Are they placing sufficient emphasis on their statements to health authorities? Are they providing the resources to ensure that a key role such as that of the school nurse can be properly fulfilled? I am worried that they have not yet done that.

The Government have a problem. The history of the school nurse service shows that the experience in different communities is diverse. No Government have developed a national framework from the start of the school nursing service. Some people believe that it began in 1892, whereas others trace it back to the 1870s. There were changes in the 1960s and in the early 1970s, and the Court report was published in 1978. The previous Government also made changes.

The importance of the school nurse service has been recognised, but there has been a lack of willingness to provide a proper framework. It has fallen between the stools of health and education and has never received the priority that it deserves. I hope that the Government will develop the statements in their documents to provide a clear lead.

There is a great need for such a clear lead. I have read several academic studies in preparing for the debate. A paper that was published by Berry Mayall and Pamela Storey in 1998 put that need in the clear context of experience in schools. The paper discusses current pressures on schools through, for example, local management of schools and large classes. It makes the point that teachers are almost too busy to provide much of the lay, informal care that they used to provide. Children therefore rely increasingly on school nurses, whose numbers are reduced.

There is a genuine problem, which merits debate. At the end of the paper Berry Mayall and Pamela Storey make the point that other health service purchasers claim that a school health service largely duplicates other health provision—GPs, primary care groups, health centres—in the health service. However, there is a key drawback, which I hope that the Minister will recognise, to that argument.

Children cannot easily seek help on their own. There are many reasons for that. They may not think of doing it, traffic may be a problem, health centres may be a distance from their homes. It is often the custom that parents look after the health and welfare of children. Children expect parents to do that and they do not often take the initiative. If health care is not provided in schools, it might never be provided for many children, especially our most vulnerable children. Researchers and other commentators are right: we need to develop the service.

I was especially anxious about the lack of statistics and information on the subject. The data are no longer held centrally. When I asked the Library for information on the number of school nurses, I received figures from 1990 to 1994. They showed a reduction in the number of school nurses over those years. There were no data after that. The Library claimed that employment data no longer provide such a breakdown. The Minister may want to consider that and obtain the data so that the Government could understand what is going on and ascertain whether the number of nurses is decreasing. That is certainly what has happened in my area.

The Royal College of Nursing told me that it is very worried and that the service was the first to be cut because it is not noticed so easily. It provides preventive health care and is therefore much more vulnerable. I hope that the Government will give the matter the attention that it deserves.

I also refer the Government to a draft national framework for school nursing practice published in October by the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association, working with the Queen's Nursing Institute. They advocate what I am talking about: there needs to be a clear framework to provide such a vital service. The introduction to the document states:

> In the absence of a clear national framework or strategy for the School Nursing Service many service developments have been ad hoc and confined to individual Trusts. With widespread disinvestment in the service over recent years, school nurses have often had to fall back on their individual skills and ingenuity with few resources.

A Government who rightly put huge emphasis on public health and a primary care-led NHS, cannot be happy with that. I hope that the Minister will make a particular comment on that draft national framework and on whether the Government are considering adopting it. I hope that they will do so because it would support a vital service.

As primary care groups and primary care trusts develop, I ask the Government to consider giving them guidelines to ensure that the school nursing service and the school health service generally are not forgotten in the allocation of resources locally. It might be too tempting to the GPs who will inevitably lead PCGs and PCTs to forget community nurses and particularly school nurses, whose voices may not be heard as loudly as they ought to be. Given the amount of money that we are talking about—a relatively small sum in the overall health budget and budgets of PCGs—that would be a mistake. The Government rightly talk of joined-up government. The service could provide so much and meet so many of their social objectives, so it is important.

I return to the comments of those in my constituency, who provoked my interest in the subject. As I said, there have been cuts, and, as a result, the health authority wanted to review the service and to consider how to use its pot of money more effectively. That review was led by the school nurses, and rightly so. I congratulate the people involved in it; many positive things came from it. They have talked about using best practice and conducted a wide review of the literature and what is going on elsewhere. They are proposing to move away from a service based on principles of routine screening to more preventive, targeted health care, which is probably right.

The review also uncovered many negative aspects, especially the impact of the cuts. School nurses in Kingston qualified the proposed service structure in which new services would be developed by saying:

> The proposed structure can be developed within current resources. However, school nurses feel that they will not be able to deliver all of the service principles with such a structure.

In other words, as a result of the cuts, they cannot deliver the service that the review required.

Although recent discussions with people who are much involved in the school nursing service have revealed that they have done many innovative things, such as ensuring

that the child protection scheme has been properly covered and pushing through the vaccination programme, they cannot give certain vulnerable children the extra support that they need. They cannot provide regular, weekly contact with schools or develop drop-in centres. They certainly cannot assume the health promotion role that the Government clearly want them to play. Even after the review, the service faces great problems.

Although some vacancies are to be filled, we have only four school nurses looking after almost 20,000 children. That shows the size of the problem. Even when the vacancies are filled, and there are perhaps seven or eight nurses, there will still be fewer than just a few years ago. It is therefore not surprising that there are problems.

Several schools have written to me about their problems. Lovelace school in Chessington said:

> The reduction in the number of Nurses available to the schools in the Borough has been a great concern to the Governors at Lovelace for a while now . . . It is important, therefore, that Ministers are made fully aware of the implications of such lack of support and are consequently urged to reconsider the funding of the service.

St. Philip's school, a special school in Chessington, said:

> I am writing to express my growing concerns about the School Health Service and the recent impact that the lack of a school nurse is having on the children in this school . . . I am concerned that we are not going to be able to carry out the statutory annual medicals for all the children this year.

That is the extent of the problem that we face. Knollmead primary in Tolworth wrote:

> Schools have missed the regular weekly nurse visit. Staff, pupils and parents knew when to expect the nurse and each week in her message book we would put any concerns requiring follow up, knowing that this would be prompt. The loss of this part of the service has been felt and I do urge its restoration for the good of the children.

Local schools are very concerned.

I stress to the Minister that the review has uncovered real concerns, which shows that we need a framework. For example, there is a wide diversity in spending on the nursing service per pupil per annum in one health authority. In 1999–2000, Kingston and district community NHS trust spent £13.86, Teddington memorial NHS trust spent £19.69 and the South West London community trust spent £31.56—more than twice as much as Kingston. Such a wide variation in the allocation of funds in the same health authority cannot be right; nor can that deliver the programmes that the Government want to deliver.

Finally, I have a particular bugbear. People talk of Kingston as a leafy borough, as the Deputy Prime Minister did early in this Parliament, but may I explain to the Minister that it is not? There are prosperous areas of course, but it is not homogeneously prosperous. Indeed, there are pockets of severe deprivation in my constituency, and children in schools need help. As the review says, in spite of the impression that Kingston and Richmond is a very affluent district, its Jarman score shows that its deprivation level is slightly above the average for England and Wales. The area includes pockets of considerable deprivation.

There are children who need the school nursing service. I urge the Minister to contact Kingston and Richmond health authority to urge it to provide the service with the resources that it needs. For the country as a whole, the Government should make sure that the service can be properly developed and properly resourced.

12.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) for raising this important topic and for making significant points to which I shall try to respond as best I can in the time available.

School nurses clearly provide an extremely valuable service to children. They have been looking after children's health for more than 100 years—the first was appointed in 1894—and they are often the first point of contact for teachers, parents and children requiring health advice in school. They often work closely with general practitioners with primary care and sometimes with specialist paediatricians, when the need arises. They also play an important part in providing a safety net for children who have perhaps slipped past the routine development checks or immunisations offered under primary care in the early years, and have a role in other immunisation and health advice campaigns and in offering counselling to teachers and children in school.

I pay tribute to and give thanks for the role that school nurses are playing this year in delivering the meningitis C vaccination. Without the school nurse network, it would be extremely hard to achieve such an unprecedented roll-out of the new vaccine in such a short time and before any other country. School nurses offer health support to children who have medical needs and can play a crucial role in all stages of child protection.

In the White Paper "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation", the Government set out a framework for the future role of school nurses as public health practitioners, including many of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised. The White Paper stated:

> School nurses are ideally placed to help children, young people and their parents find the support and services they need. The potential to develop school nurses is a growing element within the Healthy Schools programme and their role is being increasingly considered within other Government initiatives.

School nurses can provide support on personal relationships, managing stress and risk-taking behaviour. They can complement primary care services, especially for the most disadvantaged.

School nurses' enhanced child-centred public health role means that they will be working in new ways, operating across traditional professional and agency boundaries which will require multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral working to deliver high-quality and effective services. School nurses will be expected to lead teams, to include nurses and other community and education workers to assess the health needs of children and school communities and perhaps to agree individual and school health plans and the delivery of those through multi-disciplinary partnerships. They will be involved in immunisation and vaccination programmes and will also contribute to personal health and social education and to citizenship training. School nurses will offer support and counselling and promote positive mental health. The new role may involve work on teenage pregnancies or the housing needs of children who have asthma. School nurses will work with other teams across the community to provide the support that children need.

[Yvette Cooper]

The Government have set up an innovation fund of £1 million to explore new ways of working for health visitors and school nurses, including new roles and partnerships. Since last summer, 31 health visitor and school nurse leadership posts have been set up across the NHS demonstrating the new roles and ways of working. Those appointments have been made in order to develop and demonstrate the new role and to provide examples of best practice that we can roll out across the country. Health visitors and school nurses form a core element of the innovations network and provide a locus for networking across their own health regions. The posts will be demonstrating the new ways of working and focusing on the particular aspects of the needs of those local communities they serve, be those the special needs of pregnant teenagers, vulnerable families or deprived neighbourhoods, or the particular problems experienced by black and other ethnic minority communities.

The hon. Gentleman raised the question whether we should have some sort of national framework or standards. He raises an important issue to do with developing the public health role of school nurses and health visitors in practice, and how we implement many of the proposals described in "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation". One of the key methods will be through primary care groups and, increasingly, primary care trusts. New partnerships and relationships will evolve, as the primary care groups develop their public health role. That is one of the issues that the modernisation action teams are examining, as part of their work towards the national plan for the NHS to be drawn up this summer. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that issue, and we are considering it at the moment.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to point out that there are frameworks in place within which those issues can be developed, such as the health improvement programmes. He did not mention the healthy schools initiative, but that will be an important part of the future role for school nurses. Although parents have the prime responsibility for keeping their children healthy, school is clearly a vital influence on children's health. The healthy schools standard that we have developed provides a structure for the shared responsibility for promoting health and integrating initiatives aimed at the school population. The healthy schools initiative will provide school nurses with the opportunity to contribute to a common health and education agenda and to make those links between health and education that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. A number of other related policy developments recognise the potential for school nurses to contribute to the Government's agenda, such as child and adolescent mental health, parenting, quality protects, teenage parenthood and smoking. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that work on the implementation of the teenage pregnancy report must include the role of schools nurses.

By launching the national healthy school standard in October 1999, the Government set out to give all schools the opportunity to become healthy schools. We also ensured joint working between health and education authorities by funding programmes designed to support the implementation of the national healthy school standard in every local education authority. One of the conditions of funding was that the work programmes should be approved by the relevant chief education officer and director of public health. These partnerships are expected to attain national standards and criteria, and to reach a stage where they can be accredited under the national standard. In turn, they can accredit schools in their area.

We have, in the last week, accredited three health education partnerships—Liverpool, Manchester and Norfolk—with reaching the standards required by the national programme, and we expect all local programmes to be accredited by March 2002. I understand that the Kingston and Richmond healthy schools programme is aiming for accreditation in April next year.

Schools and partnerships gaining accreditation will continue to be monitored by regional and national assessors to ensure that the process is not a one-off, but a continuing improvement in the level of health information and opportunity within school communities. School nurses have a vital role to play within the development of healthy schools.

Healthy schools are an essential training ground in preparing our young people for citizenship and providing building blocks in building a healthier nation. A considerable amount of work has been done in schools in the past. This work has contributed to the development of the healthy schools programme. However, what has been slower to develop in school health promotion programmes, relative to programmes in other settings, is the wider perspective, which recognises the importance of supportive social and physical environments for health promotion.

In Leicester, for example, school nurses are involved in multidisciplinary teams across the community to ensure that there are improvements in housing for children with asthma or children in vulnerable areas. Such work to link what is done in schools, as part of the healthy schools programme, with what is done in the wider community is where school nurses have an important role to play. They need not necessarily do everything themselves, but they can work as part of a team—or as team leaders—to deliver the wider public health roles that the hon. Gentleman and I agree are important.

We believe that the national healthy school standard will encourage the development of that perspective and, through the need to link to local priorities, a greater concentration on local issues can be given, particularly in more deprived areas.

Ten schools in Kingston and Richmond have already received their healthy school award, with a further six schools due to receive their award this May. A wide range of projects is undertaken by the local schools, including an important early introduction to healthy eating through from healthy lunch box work at Buckland infants and nursery school, a refugee compact club at Southborough boys school and an impressive sun safety project at Latchmere junior school.

The hon. Gentleman referred to a fall in the number of school nurses in the area, but my information is that there

has not been a reduction. Perhaps he and I could pursue that matter later. The review has addressed important issues and has been an opportunity to examine clearly the future public health role that school nurses can play. It has recognised the value of the service provided by the school nurses.

I understand that the health authority is keen to examine the report from the child health sub-committee of the national screening committee, as one of the elements to inform development of the work locally. The hon. Gentleman talked about national guidance, and the work being done by the child health sub-committee may prove extremely important. It is looking at the evidence base involved in—

It being One o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House, without Question put, till Tuesday 2nd May, pursuant to Orders [1st and 23rd March].*

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 April 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

National Lottery

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

10 am

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I welcome the opportunity to have this topical debate, because we will know the new lottery operators in a couple of months' time. I hope that in due course my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will place both offers in the Library, so that we may judge them. I would like to thank David Price for his research, and Joe Hicks and Bryn Morgan of the Library for their assistance. I strongly commend their research paper, "The National Lottery", to all hon. Members.

It is not my intention to dwell on the respective merits of the two applicants—the holders, Camelot, and the challengers, the People's Lottery—although I will raise some concerns about Microsoft's involvement with the People's Lottery in due course. This is a debate about the future of the lottery, and I will raise the following issues: additionality; revenue-neutral definitions; the development of a national structure for the delivery of lottery terminals; the creation of a new national cause and the creation of a local community cause. I will also speak about sport—a favourite subject of mine.

Since the lottery came into being, there has been an on-going discussion about additionality versus the arm's-length principle. I now believe that a new lottery Act should dispense with additionality. I will review some aspects of the additionality argument over the past four or five years. In the past two years, the new opportunities fund has brought additionality into question. Some people say that the fund breaches both the principle of additionality and the arm's-length principle.

Central to the debate is the ambiguity about what constitutes core expenditure and what is the Government's responsibility. The funding of cancer care, the provision of after-school facilities and information technology training are particular concerns. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State argued that the new opportunities fund was in line with the principle of additionality. He said:

> the money that is going to child care, out-of-hours school activities, information technology training for teachers and healthy living centres is entirely additional to any existing Exchequer expenditure—[*Official Report*, 19 January 1998; Vol. 304, c. 679.]

In Committee on the National Lottery Bill, Lord Skidelsky, speaking for the Opposition, stated that

> on-going public services should not depend on variable, voluntary contributions...Lottery money should not be diverted to pay for what is essential at the expense of what is merely desirable. The National Lottery should not come to be seen as a sort of painless extra tax for every spending programme the Government choose—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 January 1998; Vol. 584, c. 36.]

In response, Lord McIntosh, in trying to define the principle of additionality, said:

> Important as the principle of additionality is, I am afraid that there is no practical way in which it can be enshrined in legislation—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 January 1998; Vol. 584, c. 43.]

That is one of the factors at the core of my argument.

Many people have raised concerns about additionality, and I will deal with one or two of them. Tessa Baring, member of the National Lottery Charities Board's UK committee, argued in *Lottery Monitor* magazine that many people in the voluntary sector feel dismayed by the creation of the new opportunities fund, which they consider to be breaching the principles of arm's length and additionality. She says:

> not only can they actually fund Local Authorities, but their policy directions from Government dictate their programmes, some of which are seen to cover areas of Government responsibility like teacher-training and cancer treatment.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport published a consultation paper in November 1998 outlining three initiatives. One initiative concerned cancer care and focused on four areas: prevention, screening, diagnosis and treatment, and palliative care. The proposed initiative could encompass the provision of equipment, support services, respite care, joint palliative care posts and training, and would be delivered by the voluntary sector and the national health service in partnership. The projects funded by that initiative would be in addition to those currently planned by the Government. In reality, this is a catch-up exercise.

In March 1999, the Government published a summary of the responses, which showed great concerns about breach of the additionality principle. The Secretary of State resisted the key suggestion made by the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) in Committee that the cancer prevention, detection, treatment and care programme was a matter of core expenditure. Such issues are at the root of my concern.

This year, it was announced that the new opportunities fund would partner the Department for Education and Employment to fund new information and communication technology centres in such diverse places as football clubs, schools and community buildings. Government money will pay the capital costs of setting up the centres, and the fund will pay for training, outreach, marketing and software. Some consider such an example of the NOF teaming up directly with the Government, wedding together lottery and Treasury money to fund projects, to be inconsistent with additionality, as the term was originally understood.

When we discuss the future of the lottery, we should drop additionality from the political agenda. The Government should be allowed to bid for lottery money. Of course, if the requirement for additionality ended, the Treasury might try to hold on to all the receipts. I doubt whether that would be a good idea. Rather than being allowed free access, the Government should be able to apply for moneys within the current regulations. Perhaps we could consider a maximum percentage that they could receive.

I think that additionality ought to go, at least partly because of research that I have read on how lottery money is spent in other countries. Let me give a few examples. In Pennsylvania, 40 per cent. is used to help elderly citizens. The Wisconsin state lottery helps to fund property tax relief. The Delaware lottery goes towards funding a full range of state services. In Nebraska,

[Mr. Derek Wyatt]

49.5 per cent. goes to the education innovation fund, 49.5 per cent. goes to the environmental trust fund, and 1 per cent. helps compulsive gamblers.

Florida's 1987 legislature ensured that 38 per cent. of state lottery proceeds went towards education, to support schools, community colleges, state universities, pre-school programmes and so on. In New York state, 38 per cent. funds school aid. In California, 34 per cent. goes towards special schools, higher education and kindergartens. That describes the situation only in the United States. State hospitals in New South Wales receive critical funding from the lottery. In Western Australia, money goes to public hospitals and public health services. Funds in British Columbia are earmarked for urgent health care priorities. The end of additionality would not mean huge changes; people would like the results.

The term "revenue-neutral" has confused me, although I have tried hard to find a definition of it. Perhaps it is an oxymoron. The Library's national lottery paper says:

> Lottery Duty has been set at 12 per cent. Lottery Duty is intended to be revenue-neutral, making up for lost VAT on other retail sales. If spending is diverted to lottery tickets from products attracting high levels of duty (alcohol, tobacco etc.) then the Exchequer loses out. Conversely if spending is diverted from low-taxed items (confectionery, newspapers) or from planned savings, the Exchequer gains. As ticket sales have been higher than forecast, so has the amount raised from Lottery Duty.

I have tried to find out the amount of duty paid. For 1994-95, the figure was £143 million; for 1995-96, £626 million; for 1996-97, £567 million; for 1997-98, £662 million; and for 1998-99, £625 million. I have also tried to work out what those figures mean, and sought advice from consultants and librarians who were struggling, like me, to understand the situation better. I understand that the Government have taken tax not of 12 per cent. but—I take the figures from page 9 of the lottery paper—of 14.2 per cent., 13 per cent., 12.9 per cent., 12.9 per cent. and 12.8 per cent. in the past five years.

At a crude estimate, an extra £195 million has gone to the Treasury.

Perhaps the National Audit Office could define what revenue-neutral means with respect to lottery duties so that we can ensure that more money is put into causes. For instance, NESTA—the national endowment for science, technology and the arts—has a small trust at £15 million a year, and giving that cause another £195 million would be of great help to those fields. My gut feeling is that the figure is much higher than £195 million, and I would like a definition of the formula to be agreed so that ordinary mortals such as myself can understand and make a judgment about the matter. I think that that is probably enough about oxymorons.

There are currently 24,300 lottery terminals, but we should have a terminal in every community across the United Kingdom. We need to rethink the way in which the lottery is delivered, and we must hope that even Camelot, given its partnership with the Post Office, has sussed that out. As the Barclays bank debacle and the various debates in the House and in our communities have shown, post offices are the essential service wherever we live. Margaret Burke runs my local post office in Rodmersham Green; she also runs a store, helps the village in many ways in addition to providing a service, and rarely has a day off. She is what I would call the salt of the earth and a pillar of the community. She is concerned, however, about the mooted changes to the post offices as we progress towards modernising the service. If we gave her a terminal, it could become the e-mail centre for the village, and the post office could combine with the local county primary school to be a little hub.

The lottery could be the beginning of the first national trunk road for digital services, if we approached it with a bit of imagination; and if we have not included that proposal in the tender document, we should retender. The lottery could transform our rural areas so that they become part of the smart economy, and I urge the Secretary of State to make plans to do that. If lottery terminals were used as hubs and sub-hubs for digital services as well as for the lottery, our economy would be transformed. I should add the cautious note that if that system was developed, Microsoft, a partner in the People's Lottery bid, should not be given an inbuilt advantage in providing the software packages.

I accidentally found the constituency spends of one or two hon. Members who are present. In Rossendale and Darwen, the spend on lottery tickets so far has been £28.5 million, yet that constituency has won only £2.5 million in awards. I notice that the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) is here; his constituents have spent £33.5 million on tickets, but his constituency has won only £4.7 million. In my constituency, we have spent £43.6 million, which is more than those constituencies have spent, but we have received only £1.3 million in return. People in two of my communities—one on the island and one close to Sittingbourne—may drop their cereal bowls when they hear of the new awards early on Thursday morning. Those three constituencies are not untypical, and the system is plainly unfair. I would urge the Minister to introduce a community fund whereby 20 per cent. of local receipts automatically goes back to the community.

If it is accepted that additionality has gone by the board, could we add infrastructure to the causes? Wherever I look, the infrastructure in our communities is lacking. In the community I take as my example, more than 1,850 houses are under construction, but when planning is given for a school building, it is never built, and instead we push in an extra classroom here and there. That is bad enough—but there is also the matter of the village field. For two years, the owners of the properties cater for that field, and then it is given over to the local authority and it very quickly becomes hard rock and impossible to play on. Within that planning infrastructure, there is no doctor's surgery and none is planned. We must examine our communities' infrastructure to see whether we can add something at a local level that might make a real difference.

At present, the United Kingdom sports cabinet comprises my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport, Tom Middlehurst on behalf of the Welsh Assembly, my hon. Friend the Member for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith) on behalf of the Scottish Parliament, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It wants to reduce Sport England's proportion of the lottery and redistribute it to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I checked the figures—courtesy of the Central Council of Physical Recreation—and currently the Exchequer's spend on sport in our four countries is £2.25 per head in Wales, £1.91 per head in Scotland, £1.66 per head in Northern Ireland and a mere 67p per head in England. Further changes to the current Sport England budget would severely embarrass the population of England. Sport has already lost because of the sixth cause of the new opportunities fund and if more funds are taken, England will lose again. I hope that my hon. Friend can dispel such rumours.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to think again about additionality in a new lottery Act. It should be removed once and for all. Will she consider the revenue-neutral system and a definition of such from the National Audit Office, in case the Treasury has taken more money than it should? Lottery terminals are the key to my argument. If they could be placed in each community throughout the country, a national e-mail system could be in place for everyone, including the digitally disadvantaged. Finally, will my hon. Friend consider infrastructure and the community cause and end the uncertainty about Sport England? I do not ask for much.

10.16 am

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) on securing the debate, which he introduced in a considered way. It is timely and useful. As someone who was on the Back Benches when the National Lottery etc. Bill was introduced and who also served on the Standing Committee that considered it, I do not share the hon. Gentleman's view on additionality. At the time, I was working with the National Campaign for the Arts and tabling amendments to secure the principle of additionality. The hon. Gentleman says that it is impossible to enshrine that in legislation. Well, with the support of the Government, we made a determined effort to do that with separate lines of accounting and clear statements that lottery money was to be additional to usual Government spending.

Members of the Labour party were especially vociferous in wishing the lottery money to be over and above the on-going Exchequer funding for Government responsibilities. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's argument that additionality should be kicked off the political agenda. I do not suppose that that view is shared by his friends in the sporting world or in charities, the arts or heritage activities. The lottery was set up to fund those areas of life that would always be at the back of the Exchequer queue at the time of funding rounds. It would be difficult for activities such as the arts, sports and heritage to cut a convincing argument if they were in competition with health, education and other important social services.

The lottery was set up to fund those activities that would not otherwise have received funding. It has been phenomenally successful in bringing new money and new life to a range of activities that were previously short of funds. Recognition of that fact was missing from the hon. Gentleman's speech.

The hon. Gentleman cited the cases of Nebraska, Delaware and Florida. What is the tax rate in those places? I suspect that it is much lower than it is here. The situation as regards the provision of public services is, therefore, not the same. If the tax rate is much lower, the temptation to dig into the lottery to fund activities that would normally be considered the staple diet of Exchequer funding will be that much stronger.

I also suspect that if all the money that goes into the sport lottery fund—I know that the hon. Gentleman is keen on sport—were diverted to the national health service, it would be consumed in a matter of hours. It would make precious little difference to the NHS, but an immense difference to sport, which is a prime beneficiary of the national lottery.

I am not saying that the lottery is perfect; it is not, and there have been problems. There have been high-profile cases of lottery beneficiaries running into financial difficulties. There are the revenue requirements that have been stoked up by the substantial capital grants that have been awarded in some cases. I need not go into examples, although one well-known case that probably merits a mention is down the river at Greenwich. However, there are others. It is important that the lottery has regard to the revenue implications of capital grants.

There are continuing complaints about the bureaucracy and complexity of the application process. The Government have moved to simplify the situation a bit, but there is a long way to go before the procedure is made as user-friendly as we would like. It is a pity to see people in local communities who want to bid for lottery grants spending large sums on accountants and consultants. They do not like doing that, especially if their bids are unsuccessful.

The chances of making an unsuccessful bid have, of course, increased since the establishment of the new opportunities fund. However much we all support extra funding for health care, education and environmental projects, I must question whether the fund is the right way to provide that money. There is no escaping the fact that there have been winners and losers as a result of the establishment of the fund. The losers are the original good causes: charities, sport, the arts and heritage. They have noticed that, from the end of the year, when the Millennium Commission winds up, one third of lottery money will go to support projects that many people believe should be the responsibility of core Government funding.

Concerns have arisen recently as a result of the National Audit Office inquiry into the handling of some National Lottery Charities Board projects. There is a heavy responsibility on those who discharge lottery money to ensure that they do so in a clear, accountable and responsible way. I have no doubt that the board will have read the NAO report with great care and will take note of its recommendations.

It would be wrong to end without mentioning the campaign being waged for the lottery promotion company, with which the Minister will be familiar. That poses the issue of the alleged £3.7 billion in the national lottery distribution fund that is idle at any one time. It would be helpful if the Minister would restate the Government's position on that matter. As far as I can determine, the majority of funds are earmarked for existing projects, and therefore committed. Every week, a substantial cash flow enters the lottery system, and the amount sitting in the distribution fund has grown over time.

[Mr. Peter Ainsworth]

Once again, I emphasise that the national lottery has been an enormous success. Although the big projects such as the dome and the earth centre have grabbed the headlines, the lottery has had its greatest impact on society through thousands of small grants up and down the country, which have responded to local needs.

Another criticism of the Government would be their tendency to centralise the lottery and adopt a top-down approach, whereas the original vision of the Conservative Government was for a community-based approach, under which local communities proposed ideas and put in bids for lottery cash. I am concerned about the Government's dirigiste approach under which they—rather than local communities—decide where the money goes.

Anything helping to establish and support a cause as good as the Orpheus centre in my constituency—an arts centre set up by Richard Stilgoe, which is proving immensely beneficial to young people with disabilities and is becoming a national resource, revitalising and enlivening the arts in a therapeutic context—can be no bad thing. Whoever wins the bid to run the lottery later this year, the key requirement is that the lottery continues to act as a power for good in our society.

10.27 am

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) on securing this timely debate. The lottery is now more than five years old and has had a tremendous impact on our national life. The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) described it as an enormous success and I agree. For the first time, someone I know well won £500,000 on the lottery recently, and it has transformed his family's life. Our lottery has been one of the most successful in the world, with £7.4 billion already awarded to nearly 57,000 projects across the UK.

I am sorry if the hon. Member for East Surrey believes that we have been too dirigiste in our approach. I can assure him that that is not our intention. The Government set the framework for regulation of the lottery and distribution of the net proceeds, but we do not choose the operator or distribute lottery funds ourselves. Irrespective of whether there is a change of operator, we have done much to ensure that lottery funding is more effective, equitable and accessible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey has a deep interest in the future of the lottery and has had some interesting ideas. I shall deal with each of them in turn, and with wider concerns. He referred to the new opportunities fund and said that the principle of additionality should be dropped and the Government should be allowed to bid for lottery money. He gave examples of what money is spent on around the world through other lotteries, and of what people would like money to be spent on. He is right. If we went into the street, stopped the first person that we saw and asked him what lottery funding should be spent on, I bet that he would say health and education first.

We remain committed to the principle that lottery money should add to, not substitute for, Government expenditure. We do not believe that the Government should reduce public spending programmes to take account of awards from the lottery, or use lottery funds to substitute for obligations into which they have entered. The lottery will add value, allowing for projects that would otherwise not be possible. It funds specific time-limited projects. As with all lottery funding, the new opportunities fund supports only initiatives additional to those funded from taxation. It supports activities in health, education and environment beyond those funded by the taxpayer, in the same way as it does for arts, heritage and sport.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): If the projects of the new opportunities fund prove workable, sensible and desirable and take root, will the Government be willing to see them funded from taxation in future?

Janet Anderson: That is interesting, but it is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I note what the right hon. Gentleman says, and it may be helpful if I speak about the new opportunities fund.

We have made changes to lottery distribution. Lottery money is public money, freely given. The National Lottery Act 1998 reflects the public's view that lottery money should support what they feel is important. Before it, lottery proceeds were divided between arts, charities, heritage, the millennium and sport. The 1998 Act created a sixth good cause, the new opportunities fund, which has made great progress in channelling money to important and popular health, education and environmental initiatives.

From early next year—the date depends on the rate at which lottery money flows in—we expect the fund to receive one third of lottery proceeds, as it will receive the share formerly paid to the Millennium Commission.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Will my hon. Friend the Minister cheer on a bid led by Wealdstone football club—it is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), but many of its supporters live in mine—to regenerate the Prince Edward playing fields in the Stanmore area? The bid would facilitate a stadium with a capacity of 3,000, 14 artificial football pitches, and a range of other sporting facilities.

Janet Anderson: I note what my hon. Friend says. He knows that decisions on lottery applications are not for me, and I am sure that he and his neighbouring Members of Parliament are able to speak for themselves and for the project, which sounds worthy of serious consideration.

The other good causes will continue to receive their one-sixth share beyond 2001. Careful consideration is given to the views of the public in the allocation of money from the fund. There has been, and will continue to be, consultation on possible new initiatives. The Government remain committed to the principle of additionality, and lottery funds must be used to enhance current core spending, not replace it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey also asked whether national lottery duty was revenue-neutral, and mentioned oxymorons, an

interesting point which he first mentioned yesterday. He will know that the intention was always that the duty would be designed to be revenue-neutral, on the basis that it would replace revenue lost from other sources as a result of displaced expenditure. In other words, if people spend money on the lottery, they may be less likely to spend it on other things, and we did not want the Exchequer to suffer as a result. My hon. Friend makes an interesting point about what should be done with revenue accrued to the Exchequer. I shall examine that point and write to him, and I thank him for making it.

My hon. Friend also mentioned post offices, and referred to a lady who runs a local post office in his constituency, Margaret Burke, whom he described as the salt of the earth. I represent a relatively rural constituency that contains many similar post offices, and my hon. Friend is right—they are an invaluable resource for local communities. Making the right decisions on this matter could mean the salvation of our rural post offices, because they can do so much.

Retail selection and where terminals are located is a matter not for the Government but for Camelot, under the terms of the licence granted by the former Director General of the National Lottery. Camelot's licence requires a minimum of 35,100 lottery terminals nationally, including both on-line and Instants only. Camelot is also required to employ clear minimum criteria for selection and deselection. Beyond that, responsibility for selecting and deselecting retail outlets lies with Camelot. As in the case of the Post Office, that may involve agents. I am not clear whether the Post Office imposes any additional or different conditions on its outlets, but I shall examine the matter and write to my hon. Friend. I agree that if we make the right decisions about the lottery and its role in the future of local post offices, that could transform our rural areas.

My hon. Friend also referred to disparities between spending and awards in some constituencies, referring to his, mine and that of the hon. Member for East Surrey. It was always intended that lottery funding should be distributed according to need. Nevertheless, anxieties have been expressed that some areas have not benefited as much as we would have liked from lottery funding. As my hon. Friend will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently commissioned some research into what had happened to former coalfield communities, because many hon. Members representing such areas felt that their communities had not been treated as favourably as they should have been. We hope to publish the results of that research shortly. I hope that that shows that we are always willing to reconsider such matters. My hon. Friend's idea of a community fund is good. The Government will be consulting on possible new initiatives in due course, and I invite him to submit that idea to us formally.

I note what my hon. Friend said about sport funding. I should point out that I am standing in for my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport, who has a long-standing engagement in Lancaster this morning, and who is responsible for the lottery. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I am not as knowledgeable on this matter as they expected. A direct comparison of expenditure on sport by country is difficult, as sport is structured differently from country to country. Comparisons of expenditure per capita are not necessarily meaningful.

As we start to plan for the next comprehensive spending review, it will be important for all sectors of sport to speak with one voice. Sport must be effective in articulating its needs, make the case for additional Exchequer funding in the future, and focus on how it can address the Government's priorities and objectives and provide added value. My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently published the Government's sport strategy, which I hope will make clear the challenge faced by sport and recreation in this country, with Government support, and the important part that they play in the education and health of the nation.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: A key part of that strategy was the requirement for an audit of sporting facilities. Will my hon. Friend urge my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport to encourage Sport England to take special note of the lack of modern athletics facilities, modern tennis facilities or access to artificial turf pitches for football in my constituency?

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. An audit is long overdue, and I am pleased that it was part of the strategy. Funding was recently secured for two small all-weather pitches in my constituency, which has made a huge difference to the local community by providing kids with somewhere to play. We must press ahead with the audit; I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport will persuade Sport England to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey referred to the wider availability of lottery terminals, which relates to the point that he made about post offices. As a member of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, he will be anxious, as the Government are, that the digital revolution should not result in a society of information-rich and information-poor. That is one of the biggest challenges facing the Government, which I hope will be dealt with by the forthcoming White Paper.

On the new licence, the National Lottery Commission is responsible for ensuring that the lottery is run with due propriety and that the interests of players are protected. It is also responsible for choosing the next licence holder. The current operator, Camelot, was awarded a seven-year licence in 1994, which runs out in September 2001. The commission received two bids for the next licence, from Camelot and from the People's Lottery. Provided that the commission judges that bidders will protect players' interests and run the lottery properly, the licence will be awarded to the bidder most likely to raise the most money for the good causes. Possible additional contributions to the good causes from profits will be taken into account. The name of the preferred bidder will be announced by the end of June. I noted my hon. Friend's comments about one participant in one of those bids. However, we are pleased that there are two strong bidders, as healthy competition is in the interests of both players and the good causes.

The commission took measures to ensure a level playing field for those applying. Bidders are required to install new terminals from day one of the new licence. Yesterday, my hon. Friend and I had an interesting discussion about what might happen to the old

[Janet Anderson]

terminals. Camelot has been asked to make available information on its retail outlets to other bidders, and has agreed to co-operate with the new operator if there is a handover.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: What happened to the Government's commitment to introduce a not-for-profit lottery operator?

Janet Anderson: That has always been the Government's intention; if the hon. Gentleman will be patient, his question will be answered. He asked about the application and decision process.

Mr. Ainsworth: Is it still the Government's intention to introduce a not-for-profit lottery operator?

Janet Anderson: The Government always have been, and still are, committed to a not-for-profit lottery. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.

I turn to the application and decision process. Application processes can be discouragingly long and complicated for some applicants, especially small, voluntary organisations without access to professional, legal and business advice. The introduction of simpler application procedures is another way of ensuring an equitable spread of lottery money.

Our wish for the people's lottery was for changes by distributors to make application processes user-friendly. That was followed by changes in the National Lottery Act 1998, which included establishing the principle of cross-distributor working to make the application process more accessible. However, distributors agree that there is still more to be done; they are working with my Department to identify scope in application processes for further improvement and simplification. I hope soon to be able to report progress in that respect.

Our quality, efficiency and standards team—QUEST—is considering how the cost of making applications can be contained without compromising the demands of proper accountability in decisions on how to spend public money. QUEST will soon publish phase 1 of its report, which considers applications for grants up to £100,000.

The hon. Member for East Surrey mentioned the national lottery distribution fund, which was the subject of recent press reports. To consider its balance in isolation makes no sense; it is rather like looking at one's bank balance without taking into account the cheques that have been written. Of the £3.5 billion currently in the fund, 94 per cent.—all but £200 million—has already been committed by distributing bodies; in other words, there has either been a firm agreement or an agreement in principle that the money will be handed over to a project. For example, my constituency was lucky enough to be allocated £2.7 million from the heritage lottery fund for the Ilex Mill project. The money has not yet been handed over because planning for the project has not been completed. However, it has been committed. The money will, rightly, be paid only if work is completed; it obviously cannot be spent twice.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: I am an enthusiastic supporter of a London bid for the Olympic games in 2012 or 2016, whether it is through the NLDF, Sport England or another form of lottery funding. I ask my hon. Friend not to rule out the possibility of lottery funding being used to support such a bid.

Janet Anderson: My hon. Friend knows that the Government want lottery funding to be spent in the best way possible to enhance the quality of life of all our communities. He can take it from me that that will continue to be our policy.

While money remains in the NLDF, it earns tax-free interest, which goes to the good causes and not to Government. So far, that has produced an extra £800 million for the good causes; we receive regular details from distributing bodies on their future commitments. We are well aware of the true picture.

Distributing bodies expect to commit more than £2 billion in the next 12 months and the cash balance in the NLDF should fall in the medium term as more grant payments are made. I hope that the current and planned changes to the lottery, when taken together, will help to ensure at least four things. More money will be spent on people and activities, shifting the focus away from bricks and buildings. It will be easier for smaller and less wealthy organisations to benefit. Distributors will continue to contribute to reducing social and economic deprivation. All regions of the country, whether urban or rural, will have equal and easy access to funds.

The lottery has undoubtedly been enormously successful over the past five years and, as I have tried to illustrate this morning, it has played and will continue to play an ever increasing role in our cultural and sporting lives. Most importantly, the Government believe that through many of the reforms following the 1998 Act and through increased co-operation between the distributors, the lottery will continue to have a direct impact on some of the problems caused by social and economic inequality in the UK. I conclude by thanking my hon. Friend for introducing the debate this morning. It is timely to discuss the future of the lottery and I thank him for giving us that opportunity.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth *rose—*

Mr. Maclennan *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The Minister has concluded her speech. I must tell right hon. and hon. Members that there is a structure to Adjournment debates and it is not the practice to continue a debate after the Minister has replied to it. As the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) was not present for the earlier part of the proceedings, I trust that he will not now try to continue the debate after the Minister has spoken.

10.52 am

Sitting suspended.

Bowel Cancer

11.30 am

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): After a lengthy and unexpected suspension, we come to the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), on the diagnosis and care of bowel cancer.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I have great pleasure in introducing the debate, particularly as it takes place in this special week, which is bowel cancer awareness week. The British are funny about mentioning bowels. As someone who was a nurse for 25 years, I have never had that problem—I spent most of my working life talking to people about their bowels. Therefore I am pleased to be able to do so legitimately today.

I shall run through the reasons why the debate is so important and give some facts and figures on bowel cancer in the United Kingdom. Bowel cancer is the third commonest cancer, excluding non-melanoma skin cancer, and the second commonest cause of cancer death—after lung cancer. For men, it is the third commonest cancer after lung and prostate cancer.

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): In the context of the Government's target of preventing 100,000 deaths from cancer over the next few years, does my hon. Friend agree that there is an enormous opportunity to be seized with regard to bowel cancer, given that our current survival rates are so much poorer than the best in other countries, and that we do not have screening, apart from a pilot project that is under way?

Laura Moffatt: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree that screening will become an important factor in reducing not only deaths from bowel cancer, but the misery of people going through the process. It will be important to the way in which we tackle bowel cancer. In 1997, 17,349 people died of bowel cancer and each year there are 34,000 new cases. The five-year survival rate is 37.9 per cent for men and 40.6 per cent for women, compared with around 60 per cent. in the United States of America—a statistic that highlights my hon. Friend's point. The majority of people affected are over 50, but bowel cancer can strike at a much earlier year. Despite its frequent occurrence, bowel cancer has had a low public profile—lower than that of other cancers. I hope that that is changing. I believe that a week such as this, in which awareness has been raised, will stimulate that change.

Yesterday, there was a superbly supported launch, hosted by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), at which many speakers debated the issues surrounding cancer. Ten leading cancer charities came under one umbrella, led by Colon Cancer Concern, which has brought together the concerns of those charities to ensure that they all point in the right direction and give similar advice, to prevent confusion. What I found most heartening about that launch, which was attended by my hon. Friend the Minister and which was warmly welcomed by people involved in caring for those with cancer, was the fact that it was hosted by Ladbroke, the betting people. It seemed important that an organisation whose raison d'etre is often escapism, having fun and opting out of the nitty-gritty of life felt able to support bowel cancer week. I congratulate Ladbroke on that.

There is good news. Bowel cancer is one of the most preventable cancers and one of the more curable if caught early. We can reduce the risk of it through diet, which should be high in fruit, vegetables and fibre. I strongly support campaigns to introduce more fruit into children's school diets. I congratulate the Education Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on Education and Employment on its recent report on school meals, which highlighted the importance of fruit in children's diet. Many hon. Members signed a recent early-day motion to ensure that fruit is made available to children as part of school meals. That is an important step in the encouragement of better eating.

The Early Cancer Research Campaign submitted research findings that explained and supported the protective properties of fibre. These are early findings, but they could also demonstrate that there is a protective link with aspirin. Approximately 10 per cent. of bowel cancers are genetic, but there is no genetic testing despite the fact that family history is becoming increasingly important. However, most sufferers unfortunately do not have a family history of bowel cancer, which is why screening is most important. Regular screening is recommended, especially for those who are at risk.

Professor Gordon McVie, the director-general of the Cancer Research Campaign, said:

> £84 million of the NHS spend on bowel cancer treatment and diagnosis and the incalculable cost of human suffering could be saved each year if only people knew about prevention.

We are here precisely to prevent the pain and misery and, of course, to save national health service spending on cancer.

Diagnosis is key. I pay tribute to Lyn Faulds-Wood, who is fronting a national helpline that people may call to talk about their symptoms, so that they have an idea of whether they have something to be worried about. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Department of Health have supported the helpline, which is an important move.

I hope that I will not offend anyone in the Chamber if I outline a few important symptoms. Hon. Members and colleagues may read what I have said and this may strike a note with them. It is important to take notice of persistent changes to bowel movements. Frequent bowel action, a need to go to the toilet again and again and diarrhoea-like stools are important indicators that must be heeded. Piles, itching in the anal area and a sore anus must be taken seriously if they last for more than six weeks. Unexplained anaemia, a lump or mass in the abdomen and severe colicky pain are all important indicators.

Treatment is available. Surgery is the primary treatment and, if the disease is caught early enough, is often the only treatment that is needed. However, drugs play a part. I want to raise the subject of drugs with the Minister. There are concerns that some anti-bowel cancer drugs may not be being offered to all the patients who need them. In particular, the Campaign for Effective and Rational Treatment—CERT—is concerned that there may still be some postcode prescribing, although it and I warmly welcome the ability of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence properly to evaluate drugs and make them available. I hope that we shall soon have good news about Taxol

[Laura Moffatt]

and Taxitere. However, it appears that not enough bowel cancer sufferers are being offered treatment. It is important that that be done. There have been some enormous advances in cancer, especially since the appointment of the national cancer director and the setting up of NICE. It would be wrong for NICE to be used by the health authorities as an excuse for not providing drugs while awaiting a decision. I hope that the Minister will comment on that. CERT is looking for central funding for many of those drugs, to take away the fear that patients may not have access to them.

Bowel cancer is low profile, but I believe that, after this week, this debate and the launch of the helpline, that will change. I certainly hope so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) has obtained the permission of the initiator of the debate, the Minister and myself to take part.

11.40 am

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) on securing the debate, especially as it is national bowel cancer week and the 10 groups in the consortium are really raising the awareness of the issue. Men and women throughout the country will learn about the issue, which previously has been a quiet area. I have recently returned from the United States, where we visited cancer institutes as part of the investigation by the Select Committee on Science and Technology. We were made ultra-aware of how the Americans can do everything better than us—some of us have learned to live with that, but it is true in the case of their survival rates, which, at one year and five years, are greater than ours. They are just better at it, despite their problems with private insurance and so on. The Select Committee will pronounce on the situation. They can get about 90 per cent. recovery with early-stage detection of colorectal cancer, and that is simply not attained in this country.

There is agreement on both sides of the great pond that the decrease in incidence of bowel cancer—and there is a decrease—is due to increased screening practices and the removal of early-stage polyps from individuals who visit their doctor early. Mortality rates are also decreasing, and it is agreed that that is also due to decreasing trends in incidence rates and increasing survival rates. As my hon. Friend points out, 17,000 people still die every year and 32,000 people contract bowel cancer.

Detection at an early stage usually means surgery when polyps are removed. That prevents them becoming invasive, and that is imperative. However, there is great success with drugs such as Campto, as well as at later stages of the disease. Hopefully, with the good news that Taxotere has been approved, NICE will be looking at these drugs too, and the Government's plan to spread equality across the country in the availability of these drugs will penetrate into the colorectal drug scene as well. I congratulate the campaigning zeal of groups such as CancerBACUP, Cancer Link and CERT, and particularly within CERT the campaigning zeal of Hugh McKinney, who has kept us on our toes about drugs and that issue for some time.

I would like to say something about the risk factors. As my hon. Friend said, it is quite clear that there are genetic factors, family history problems and individual problems with those who have had irritable bowel syndrome for some time, which, in some cases, can be a preamble to some cancers. However, I should like to say a few words on the other risk factor—diet—to which my hon. Friend alluded. I have always known and been brought up to believe that in Scotland we have a terrible diet. There is no doubt that the bowel cancer rate is twice that in England. No doubt the Scottish Parliament will handle that in its own way. It is a diet that is short on vegetables and low in fibre, with delicacies such as fried Mars bars and chips. It has moved on to this year's model—Jaffa cakes and chips. The chips are advertised as coming from organic potatoes. That is all right, then; it will be thought that the incidence of bowel cancer syndrome will be less. I doubt that very much.

I am also pleased with Delia, Jamie and Nigel, who have taught a nation how to cook and got them interested in food and how to prepare it. I am much more impressed by local community groups—I should not say "more" because Delia and I support the same football team and I shall not be allowed to sit beside her. Nevertheless, I am impressed by local groups that teach young people about food and nutritional value. It is particularly impressive, when one visits schools, to see what used to be the domestic science classes—now food technology—in which young men and women discuss nutritional values and compete with each other to make the best delicacies. There is now a breakdown in genders, and both men and women make very good cooks, which is a real step forward, which is being encouraged.

I am also impressed by the research undertaken at the Institute of Food Research in Norwich at which the value of eating broccoli is being correlated with the decrease in the incidence of bowel cancer. Much exciting work is being undertaken at the genetic level, too. We, in the cancer field, are all imbued with such enthusiasm and excitement because we are learning so much more about its genetic basis and how to prevent other factors from moving it on to such deadly stages. During the past few years, the Government have taken some amazing initiatives in moving cancer up the agenda and I am sure that everyone in the House agrees that my hon. Friend the Minister was right to ask for more support for screening, that drugs be available throughout the country and that those who need such drugs will receive them. In the next two years, Britain's war against cancer will be at its most vigorous.

11.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) on securing such a timely debate in what is national bowel cancer week. I was delighted to attend its official launch yesterday, which was hosted by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the work of both my hon. Friends, the organisations involved in yesterday's launch and the voluntary sector charities and patient groups, the professionals and those companies that have worked so hard with us. We rely on them to help us deliver the improvements that we must make.

If we are to make further steps forward in bowel cancer, it is clear that we must take action across the board on prevention, screening, early detection, high-quality treatment and care, palliative care and research. We have set clear targets for saving the lives of those suffering from cancer. During the next 10 years, we want to reduce the death rate by 20 per cent. for those under 75 years. That is an ambitious target, and whether we achieve it will depend on improvements in prevention as well as in treatment.

We can make large gains on the prevention side. Deaths from bowel cancer can be reduced by changes in people's life styles, such as improvements in diet, keeping active and, particularly, fruit and vegetable consumption. We are investing £750,000 from the public health development fund in a diet and cancer-reduction project. It will test approaches to increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and produce a guide setting out best practice that we can replicate throughout the country. Five pilot sites for the project have been identified. It will be launched in July; we look forward to receiving the results. It is important that it provides to children and adults information not only on diet, but on how to improve access to certain foods. It is not much good knowing that we must increase our fruit and vegetable consumption if it takes three bus rides to reach the nearest shop that sells affordable fruit and vegetables. We must reduce not only the number of deaths from bowel cancer, but the inequalities.

This year's European week on cancer, which will be in October, will focus on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption among children aged from five to 10 years, and their families. We will be providing funding to health promotion activities in respect of that initiative. However, we must go further, and I shall ask the new modernisation action team on prevention and inequalities to look at issues that surround diet and to examine what more can done to improve access to fruit and vegetables.

My hon. Friends mentioned awareness, which is extremely important. We know that colorectal cancer is one of our major cancer killers. Men and women who are diagnosed early, before it has spread to other parts of the body, have a good survival rate. However, we know that too many people ignore their symptoms, self-treat, or are too embarrassed to go to their doctor. I welcome the Cancer Research Campaign's appeal on breaking the taboo, and the work being carried out for national bowel cancer week to raise awareness and encourage people to discuss openly symptoms that they might otherwise have been too embarrassed to consider.

The problem is not simply about patients being aware of their symptoms. We must ensure that their symptoms are identified quickly, referred appropriately and treated speedily. That is why, from July, all patients whose symptoms could suggest bowel cancer and who are referred urgently by their general practitioners will be offered out-patient appointments within two weeks. Although bowel cancer is a common problem nationally, an individual GP is unlikely to see more than one or two cases a year. We therefore need to provide support for GPs so that they can distinguish between patients whose symptoms may be cancer and a larger number of patients who have similar symptoms arising from other causes.

We have been working with primary and secondary care groups, voluntary organisations and patient groups to develop cancer referral guidelines to help primary care teams identify patients who need to be urgently referred for specialist appointments. The guidelines will also help GPs to identify patients unlikely to have cancer, who can then be reassured and safely watched in primary care. Those guidelines are being sent to GPs, primary care groups, trusts and health authorities this week. They were launched on the internet at the end of March and will be widely available.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley mentioned screening, and we are anxious to know the merits of introducing a national screening programme. Following advice from the United Kingdom National Screening Committee, the Government are piloting bowel cancer screening. The pilot will provide valuable information on the effectiveness, feasibility and public acceptability of screening for bowel cancer in an ordinary national health service setting rather than a specialist research environment. The pilot will run until 2002 and its results will provide the basis for a decision on the introduction of any national population screening on bowel cancer.

We want all cancer patients, wherever they live, to have access to the same high-quality services. Since 1997, we have invested significant extra resources on colorectal cancer to support the implementation of an evidence-based guidance programme. That has been enormously successful in improving early diagnosis and quality of treatment for patients. We are also investing nearly £200 million in cancer equipment to improve diagnosis and treatment services and cut delays. We will work closely with health authorities and hospitals to ensure that those additional resources are used for those in the greatest need.

Cancer patients also want certainty and choice about the care that they receive. We must ensure that we place patients at the centre of the process, so we shall invest £6 million over the next two years in a national project to improve the process of care for patients with suspected or diagnosed cancer. Nine cancer collaboratives centres have been based across the national health service to cover 14 million people, and have been selected to take part in a national programme to streamline every stage in the patient's journey, from diagnosis to treatment and follow-up care. The aim is to create a gold standard of care for cancer patients and to spread the new ideas across the NHS.

All the experts in the field—everyone who is part of the cancer journey—must work together to identify problems and bottlenecks, and to ensure that the patient is central to the process. It will mean the earliest possible appointments with specialists for patients whose GPs suspect that they have cancer, a speedy diagnostic process and, perhaps, attending one-stop clinics where all the diagnostic tests are carried out on the same day, thereby removing the need for repeated visits. It means obtaining results quickly, booking appointments so that patients know when and where they will be treated, and providing a choice of dates for the convenience of the patient. It means co-ordinating aspects of treatment to speed up the process. For example, a patient who requires radiotherapy following surgery should not experience delays between the various components of treatment. Having visited the cancer collaboratives

[Yvette Cooper]

centre in Birmingham, I was impressed by the progress being made to improve support and treatment for patients.

My hon. Friends expressed concerns about the availability of drug treatments. I share their concerns about the postcode lottery, whereby certain drugs are available in one health authority and not others. The Government firmly believe that treatment should be based on people's ability to benefit, wherever they live. We are considering additional topics for appraisal by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence during the following year, and anti-cancer drugs are among them. Professor Mike Richards, the national cancer director, is leading urgent discussions with NICE to decide on the order and level of priority. I take seriously the points made by my hon. Friends. The resources available to health authorities have increased—a 6.8 per cent. cash increase was announced in December, and, since the Budget, an extra £600 million has been allocated to health authorities for this financial year. Additional resources for drugs are being made available, and investment must be improved and increased in future.

Concerns have also been expressed about work force issues. We need better information for work force planning, more flexible training and development, and innovative solutions to some long-standing problems. Work force development is one of our priorities in terms of improving cancer services. Professor Mike Richards will be working closely with the profession to ensure that there are sufficient trained personnel in diagnosis, treatment and care, and that working practices are modernised to best effect.

High-quality research, in prevention and treatment, is a vital element in our cancer strategy. In 1998-99, the Government spent £5.5 million on research into colorectal cancer. Research included studies of how bowel cancer treatment and referral delays vary across services in the Yorkshire area, and what patient and service factors affect those variations. Other research included systematic collection and analysis of existing evidence on surgery and palliative chemotherapy for older people who have bowel cancer, the results of which are currently under review. It is important that we do not forget the importance of palliative care, which is an essential part of improving cancer services and support for patients.

Following the Downing street seminar last year, which was hosted by the Prime Minister, the cancer research funders forum was established with the main aim of ensuring that a co-ordinated approach to research funding is pursued wherever possible, in order to obtain the best results. My hon. Friends will be aware that a broad consultation and national debate will take place during the next three months, which will enable us to draw up a national plan in the summer. Discussion of cancer and bowel cancer issues will be part of that process. We have made it clear that cancer is one of our top priorities.

As my hon. Friends said, survival rates must be increased. We should not only consider what is happening elsewhere in the world but tackle inequalities in this country. We are making progress on colorectal cancer. Survival rates are improving, but we have a long way to go. My hon. Friends are right to be optimistic about the progress that we can make. We know that huge challenges lie ahead, but I believe that we can make a real difference in better prevention, awareness and treatment and swifter diagnosis, which will ultimately mean that we can save lives.

Connex South Central

12 noon

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I shall keep my comments reasonably brief, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) would like to make a short contribution.

The timing of this debate is fortunate. As the Minister will know, negotiations with Connex and Govia, the two competitors vying for the contract to run suburban train services in south London, are in full swing. I am sure that the Minister appreciates the irony of Govia, which is part-owned by the French state railway, SNCF, bidding to run train services in the United Kingdom. Indeed, he might like to comment on that and on the fact that the Vivendi group, which owns Connex, part-owns Govia—a bizarre state of affairs. The Minister and the Strategic Rail Authority will have to be especially vigilant in assessing the bids to ensure that they are truly competitive.

Connex has both an advantage and a disadvantage in the negotiations. As it now provides the train services involved, commuters have first-hand experience of the service that it provides. To discover their views, I conducted a rail survey in January, to which 145 commuters responded. The survey was conducted before Connex's services were reduced as a result of the industrial dispute. Several people who responded to the questionnaire contacted me shortly afterwards to say that their responses would have been significantly different had they received the questionnaire during the dispute.

Passengers perceive Connex's performance as poor. Three quarters of those surveyed said that their trains were late on arrival and, perhaps most damaging for Connex, more than half did not want its franchise to be extended. Connex might argue, with some justification, that such a self-selected sample is not representative and that the survey was not scientific. However, it is clear that it must significantly improve the quality of its service both before and after any franchise extension if it is to receive the support of a vocal minority of its customers.

The survey also revealed some worrying statistics for the Government. An overwhelming majority of respondents—68 per cent.—opposed Government plans for the partial privatisation of London Underground. The Minister might like to comment on that.

Although the survey provided useful feedback, it was completed in January and I wanted more up-to-date information from commuters before today's debate. In the past few months, I have received a significant number of letters informing me of commuters' views. I see that the Minister has a copy of the leaflet distributed at Wallington station yesterday, asking commuters travelling to London this morning to join me to share their impressions of train services and their hopes for the future. On my journey this morning, I was joined by no fewer than three Connex employees, too—the station manager for the stations in my constituency, her deputy and their commercial manager. I was met at Victoria by a further two Connex employees, including Geoff Harrison-Mee, the managing director. I had until now underestimated the power of the humble Adjournment debate.

I shall detail some of the points that my fellow commuters and others made. Some matters will require substantial investment. Others require a different attitude or better staff training. I welcome the fact that Connex has established a college of environment and transport, as it is clear that some problems are the result of a lack of training or awareness.

Another common theme is anxiety about communication. On Friday, I drove to one of my local stations, Carshalton, to find that my train had been cancelled. I spoke to the person in the ticket office, who advised me that a train that I could catch instead would leave shortly from Carshalton Beeches—a station on a different line. When I arrived there, I found that that train had been cancelled. The person in the ticket office told me that staff there were not informed about cancellations on other lines. It is hard to believe that employees of the same company, working in ticket offices just a mile apart, do not know about cancellations on other lines run by their company. That communication problem seems relatively easy to solve.

The electronic displays are definitely an improvement, which I welcome, but they must be supplemented by verbal communication so that when information about a train disappears from the display because it has been cancelled, as occasionally happens, passengers are told what has happened and why. At the moment, information about the train appears until the last moment and then disappears, to be replaced by information about the next train, which is due to arrive in 15 or 20 minutes' time. The display must provide real-time information. Connex is working on that—the sooner it manages to resolve the problem, the better.

I have received many complaints about late-running trains. This morning I raised with a commuter, Mr. Williamson, the unwillingness of train operating companies to pay compensation for delayed journeys and consequent loss. Mr. Williamson is a professional musician who has suffered consequential financial loss because of train delays. The train operator—not Connex in that instance—was not able to help. Reliability is also affected when trains run early. I have on several occasions arrived at the station dead on time to find the train that I was expecting to catch just pulling out of the station, 30 seconds early. Therefore reliability at both ends of the spectrum needs to be addressed.

Frequency is the major concern expressed in correspondence and is an area where results would have been significantly different had the survey been carried out a couple of weeks later. Since the drivers' overtime dispute, an adequate timetable has been replaced by a frustrating one. For commuters using stations such as Hackbridge, there are enormous gaps in the timetable at peak hours. In some cases, they have to switch to a slower line so that they can get a seat. I spoke a couple of days ago to someone who no longer commuted from Carshalton; he had had to change to Wallington, which is further away and involves a longer journey, because he wanted to guarantee getting a seat in the morning.

The cleanliness of trains is also frequently raised and the problem is all too visible. Trains are awash with fast-food packaging. One's feet stick to carriage floors because people have discarded their Coke cans, depositing the residue on the floor. I am afraid that those are the travelling conditions that people face daily.

[Mr. Tom Brake]

What is the future according to Connex? It sets out its proposals in its document "20/20 Vision"; I am sure that the Minister will be aware of the content of that document. The future according to Govia is not yet ready for publication, which is disappointing as it will leave commuters—and Members of Parliament, for that matter—with little time in which to assess the viability of its bid. The Connex document contains many attractive propositions: immediate compensation of 50 per cent. of the ticket price if trains are delayed for more than 30 minutes and 100 per cent. if trains are delayed for more than an hour; replacement of the 600 slam-door carriages by 2003; and proposals to increase line capacity and speed up commuter trains. However, what the people who speak to me, and I as a commuter, want is an undertaking that services will improve. The mental leap required to imagine the service outlined in the document, compared with the present service, is too great.

Certain guarantees are needed. The first is that reliability, punctuality and cleanliness will improve and overcrowding decrease. Secondly, the service levels that customers enjoyed before the dispute will need to be restored. Thirdly, we will need a genuine metro-style service: one for which commuters can turn up and be reasonably certain that there will be another train in 10 or 15 minutes, so there is no mad rush to catch the next one on the timetable. Trains should not be bunched together. There is not much point in having four trains an hour if they arrive in pairs with a time delay of only five minutes between the two.

Fourthly, in the London borough of Sutton there is clearly a demand for more trains to run later on a Friday and Saturday night. At the moment, there is a desperate rush to catch the last train home when people have been out to see a show in central London or have been making good use of the facilities in Sutton town centre. We need a company with vision to deliver the services that we require.

Unless Connex and Govia can sign up to those four commitments, they will not be worthy of an extended franchise and the Secretary of State and the Strategic Rail Authority should reject their proposals. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam and I offered Connex and Govia the opportunity to debate these issues in front of passengers and to a separate audience of businesses. I am pleased that both have accepted the invitation jointly, so passengers and businesses can directly compare the proposals on offer. My hon. Friend and I can assure Connex and Govia of a lively and well-informed audience at those meetings.

Rail privatisation was supposed to deliver rail services of quality with standards of customer care that were equal to those of the aviation industry. I am afraid that it has not done so. The franchise negotiations provide the last opportunity for train companies, the Strategic Rail Authority and the Government to convince passengers that significant benefits will derive from the privatised railway industry. For the sake of millions of beleaguered commuters, I hope that they succeed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) obtained the permission of the initiator of the debate, the Minister and myself to participate.

12.11 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I shall be brief, but I wish to add a couple of points. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), to the Minister and to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to take part in this timely and important debate.

As I listened to my hon. Friend describing his journey to London today, I wondered whether he was being protected or whether various Connex managers were being protected by him from many of their customers. Certainly, on the basis of the heated correspondence that I receive from my constituents, it is the management of Connex that needs protection. I am impressed by my hon. Friend's journey, and I look forward to experiencing a similar quality of service with the managing director and others on hand.

My hon. Friend has already described the glitzy presentation and vision that we have received from Connex, but we are still waiting for the more detailed vision of Govia to be published. From my personal experience and that of many of my constituents, since it secured its first franchise Connex has been long on promises but poor on performance and delivery. My constituents regularly experience cancellation of services, short-running trains, late-running trains and overcrowding. Only last year, Connex was fined substantially for running overcrowded trains. It is vital that the two companies competing for the franchise understand that my constituents do not want a regime of penalties: they want reliable services. My hon. Friend was right to set out the four tests that should be applied, among others, to the two bids.

I wish to dwell on two issues. One is about station maintenance and management. Over the past two years, I have experienced an appallingly unsatisfactory service from Connex regarding the upgrading and maintenance of two of the main stations—Cheam and Sutton—in my constituency. After almost four years of to-ing, fro-ing and buck passing, we have at last seen work commence at Sutton station, which we hope will lead to a major improvement in accessibility for disabled people and improved facilities for the travelling public.

Understandably, local people faced considerable inconvenience as buildings around the station were knocked down. For months, hoardings were up but no action was taking place, despite senior management's claim that the project was on target for completion about now. In fact, the work will not be completed for many months to come.

Another project at Cheam station has not even started. On the up platform to London every day—and particularly on rainy days like today—a canopy, occupied by pigeons but with no glass or plastic in it, makes the experience of travelling to work sheer misery. I have received letter after letter promising me and my constituents that we will see much needed investment and that the canopy will be replaced—but it has not happened. Why not? My constituents do not understand how a company that cannot get some of the

basics right can seriously compete for another franchise. I hope that it will take that on board, and that the Minister will assure me that some of those concerns will be reflected back to Connex.

We have a franchise that is working at the moment, and we are in the bidding process. One would have thought that the company that is running the service would want to put on the best possible service to guarantee that it gets the franchise back again. This company, however, has adopted a novel tactic: it is running a worse service than hitherto. If, as a result, it loses the franchises, as many of my constituents feel that it should, what will happen in the interregnum when it is the caretaker for a service that it will pass on to another subsidiary of its parent company? Will Connex immediately pass it over? Will it continue to run the service and, as many of my constituents would see it, run it down still further? My constituents were promised that the service would get better through the franchising process, but it has got worse. I hope that the Minister will give us some words of assurance about that. Like my hon. Friend, I look forward to hearing the answers from both companies in due course.

12.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing the debate and providing an opportunity for the House to discuss the renewal of the Connex South Central franchise. I commend the hon. Gentleman for his assiduousness in collating and representing his constituents'concerns about these services. I welcome the news that Connex and Govia have agreed to debate such concerns with audiences of passengers and business people.

I listened carefully to the comments of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), especially about station maintenance and management, and intend to say a few words about the current worsening of the service provided by Connex as a result of a number of difficulties. I take a keen interest in this matter, both as the Minister with responsibility for transport in London and as the Member of Parliament for Streatham, whose three railway stations are served by Connex South Central trains. Indeed, the House will know how concerned I am about performance and service quality on the rail network. My mailbag shows all too well that passengers on Connex South Central services have first-hand experience of the frustrations caused by poor performance.

The latest performance figures rate Connex South Central in category C for overall performance, and the results of the first national passenger survey show that only 71 per cent. of Connex South Central's passengers were satisfied or very satisfied with their service. There is clearly considerable room for improvement. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam outlined his concerns about the current problems affecting Connex South Central's services. Over recent weeks, those services have been adversely affected by a dispute about working hours that has led to some drivers refusing to work overtime and on rest days. Without overtime and rest-day working, Connex cannot deliver all the services in the advertised timetable. In order to mitigate the effects of the dispute, and to provide as much certainty to passengers as possible, the shadow Strategic Rail Authority has agreed that Connex can operate an emergency timetable until the dispute is settled or the new drivers are fully trained.

Although the shadow SRA and I accept that the situation is not ideal, it is better for passengers to know in advance which services will run, so that they can plan their journeys and reduce delays to a minimum. The emergency timetable will not excuse Connex from its passengers charter commitments, under which it remains liable to compensate passengers for delayed or cancelled journeys.

As the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington will be aware, the Connex South Central franchise was awarded in April 1996 to Connex Rail Ltd., a subsidiary of Vivendi SA, for a seven-year period that commenced on 26 May 1996. However, many considered those franchise contracts to be a potential obstacle to improvement. In view of that, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister issued new instructions and guidance to the franchising director last September, and asked him to deliver improvements through renegotiation of the franchise agreements.

When considering renegotiation requests, we ask the franchising director to give due weight to six commitments. First, he should consider current performance, customer services, innovation, investment and efficiency. Secondly, there must be new or earlier investment. Thirdly, better performance must be secured. Fourthly, there must be initiatives to promote integrated transport. Fifthly, we require a willingness to give passengers a greater voice in the level and standard of services. Sixthly, value for the taxpayer must be obtained.

In November 1999, the franchising director announced that the Connex South Central franchise would be one of the first three to be considered for replacement. That franchise, the Great North Eastern Railway and the Chiltern franchises were chosen because they were thought to offer great potential for improvements and developments, which could be delivered in a relatively short time scale. On 14 March, the franchising director announced that Connex Rail and Govia, the current franchisee of Thameslink, had been shortlisted for negotiations for the Connex South Central franchise.

The franchising director will look for evidence that bidders are committed to a step-change improvement in service quality. In particular, he wants early achievement of high performance standards, including cleanliness of trains—the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington made a point about that—as well as provision of information to passengers and demonstrable benefits to passengers throughout the door-to-door journey experience. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we will expect the Govia and Connex bids to meet all necessary competitive criteria.

Mr. Brake: I am happy that the Minister has confirmed that the bids must be competitive, but could

[Mr. Brake]

he explain how the process will work? How will he ensure that Vivendi and Govia do not talk to each other behind the scenes?

Mr. Hill: That is the franchising director's task. We have total confidence that he will be aware of the links to which the hon. Gentleman alluded, and we expect him to scrutinise the detail of the bids carefully. I hope that that goes some way to reassure the hon. Gentleman.

The franchising director has made it clear that proposals will need to be far more ambitious than Connex's initial submissions. Passengers will rightly look for signs that potential operators are serious about making improvements. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that the contents of the proposals from Connex and Govia cannot be disclosed at the current stage of the franchise replacement process. However, we are determined that passengers should be given a say in their rail services. When considering proposals for franchise replacement, the franchising director will consult local authorities, passenger transport executives, rail users consultative committees, regional planning bodies and regional development agencies, among others. He will encourage rail users consultative committees to talk to a wide range of individuals and local groups, and conduct his own national passenger survey.

Anxiety has also been expressed about several weaknesses identified in current franchising agreements, which the franchising director will seek to rectify in the new contracts. He will try to strengthen requirements in several key respects: on performance, for example, there will be higher penalties and lower breach thresholds, with more robust operating plans for a consistently more reliable service.

Improvement is also needed to tackle overcrowding, which is a serious problem. There will be a new demand limit, which will reflect the capabilities of trains and infrastructure. It will be increased when capacity is increased as part of the replacement franchise agreement. There will also be regular surveys to show satisfaction ratings for each company, with penalties for those companies that fall below benchmark levels.

Passenger service requirements will be protected, and the present higher train mileage will be written into the replacement franchise agreement. The passengers charter will be revised every five years, with standards continually improving. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority will also aim to improve compensation for passengers. The new and improved passenger performance measure will include all trains, every day, including weekends, with no allowances for void days, unlike the current passengers charter measurement.

Mr. Burstow: Can the Minr reassure us that there will no longer be an incentive to run short, and therefore overcrowded, trains so as to claim to have run a train?

Mr. Hill: We expect that phenomenon, with which I am familiar, to be avoided under the terms of the new franchise agreement.

The importance of safety cannot be overstressed. Franchisees will be under an obligation to produce plans continually to drive up standards and to develop transport integration. New rolling stock will need to include space for bicycles, which is always a matter of concern to Liberal Democrat Members.

The franchising director's objective is to replace the shorter franchises expiring by 2004 within about two years. However, it is important to remember that the franchising director is not committed to accepting Connex's proposal or any other. If an application is to succeed, it will have to guarantee better performance, more investment, expansion of network capacity, improvements for passengers and value for taxpayers'money. If applications fail to deliver those improvements, the franchising director may decide instead to allow the existing Connex South Central franchise to run its course until it expires in 2003. That would be the second-best solution, but it is preferable to agreeing to a new, longer franchise without having secured additional passenger benefits.

The franchising director has already shown that he is prepared to refuse an earlier bid from Connex for a franchise extension. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington will recall that the Connex South Central franchise agreement incorporated a clause that gave Connex the option to bid for an extension of the franchise term from seven to 15 years, subject to the franchising director agreeing the terms of the extension with Connex and being satisfied that it represented value for money. In July 1998, the franchising director received and considered proposals from Connex. He concluded that they were not sufficient to justify extending the franchise and refused to extend it.

I trust that the hon. Gentlemen will be reassured that any decision on the replacement of the Connex South Central or any other franchise will be taken only after the most careful consideration of the benefits that replacement would bring, and after consultation with passengers and other interested parties. Only companies that guarantee better performance, more investment, expansion of network capacity, improvements for passengers and value for money for the taxpayer will succeed.

Manningham Mills

12.29 pm

Mr. Marsha Singh (Bradford, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the regeneration of the magnificent, historic Manningham mills. It is a pleasure to have the debate under your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is an equal pleasure that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) is the Minister who will respond to the debate. I assure him that if he gives me something today, the best wishes of my colleagues, my constituents and other citizens of Bradford will ensure that his career not only flies but soars. I am sure that he is far too sensible to fly too close to the sun if that happens, and will avoid the fate of Icarus.

The regeneration of Manningham mills is vital and urgent, because the fabric of the building is deteriorating day by day, and if nothing is done the point will come when the mills cannot be saved. Delay is a deadly enemy and may prove the mills'nemesis; I cannot stress that enough. We are near the point at which we will not be able to save the building, which would be a disaster not only for the mills but for Bradford and the pride of Bradford. It deserves to be, and must be, saved.

The mill was commissioned by Samuel Cunliffe Lister, Lord Masham, was built between 1871 and 1873 and is one of the most remarkable buildings not only in England, but in the world. The chimney is 249 ft high and dominates the Bradford skyline, as the mill once dominated Bradford's economic, social and political development. Its scale is immense, with 16 acres of floor space and a facade that is 1,050 ft long. I am not an expert on architecture, but I am informed that it is monumental, and that the style derives from the Italian renaissance, with an emphasis on proportion and symmetry, and has elements of the baroque that lend drama to the structure. Sounds wicked, innit?

The mill has a special historic significance to the Labour movement and the Labour party. In December 1890, Lister imposed wage cuts on his workers, which led to a bitter five-month strike. I want to quote a short account of the end of that strike, which will have a resonance for the modern Labour movement:

> The strike was now gaining a stronger hold. By March 3rd the number of strikers totalled over 4,000 and production was brought to a standstill. On Thursday, March 26th, a procession through Bradford followed by a public meeting was attended by 20,000 people. Sympathy for the strikers was growing. A few days later, on Easter Monday, March 30th, crowds of similar numbers again gathered to protest.
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> The climax was near. It started on Sunday, April 12th, 1891. Drew approached Bradford's Chief Constable, the Mayor and the Town Clerk to advise them that the Bradford Trades Council had arranged for Ben Tillett, the leader of the London Docks Strike in 1889, to speak at St George's Hall. He requested permission to hold an overflow meeting on open space next to the Hall. The Watch Committee refused.
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> Nevertheless, the meetings went ahead. One of the speakers at the outdoor meeting was Haydn Saunders, a member of the Socialist League and a Walsall Councillor. He stood on a bench to address the crowd and was promptly arrested. He was taken to the police station and placed in the charge room but was not charged. It was apparent that the Watch Committee and the police were reluctant to have their actions discussed in court.
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> The following day, April 13th, things took a more serious turn. The Times carried this account of that Monday evening:
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> "As was feared, the disturbances which commenced yesterday afternoon became serious during the evening, so much so that throughout the whole of the night the town was one scene of disorder and uproar. The military had to be called out, and the Riot Act read by the Mayor, Mr E W Hammond."
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> So it was that, at 5 minutes past 9 o'clock that evening, 106 rank and file of the Durham Light Infantry arrived in the town centre from Bradford Moor, each having 40 rounds of ball cartridge.
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> They paraded the streets with bayonets drawn and charged the people in various directions. This proved ineffective and a baton charge by the police was deemed necessary. As a result of the evening's violence, many were injured and 10 men were arrested.

The strike began to change the course of the Labour movement. While it was going on, W. H. Drew was discussing with Fred Jowett and other colleagues how they could challenge the intervention of the police. Drew said:

> Labour must take political action to gain control of the police force. It's the only way to protect the civil liberties of the working class and ensure a fair deal.

Although the strike failed, it was of immense significance: it led directly to the founding of the Independent Labour party on 13 January 1893. Among those present at the founding conference were George Bernard Shaw, Keir Hardie—the first socialist Member of Parliament—and Fred Jowett, who became a Minister in the 1924 Labour Government.

In addition to its historical impact on Bradford and the Labour movement, the mill's economic impact on Bradford was immense. At its height, it employed more than 7,000 workers. Many of Bradford's newer population started their working lives in the mill. They owe it a great debt. Sadly, the textile industry was hit by various recessions after the second world war and jobs were lost steadily.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Bearing in mind what my hon. Friend has just said about this enormous landmark in Labour's history, once he has achieved his aim and that wonderful building is refurbished and brought back to life, could we have a plaque to commemorate the sterling work of those early pioneers of Labour's history, particularly in relation to the Manningham mill strike?

Mr. Singh: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I will remember and perhaps propose at a later date. As I said, the textile industry was hit by various recessions and jobs were lost steadily. The recession of the 1980s hit the mill hard, and in 1997 Lister called in the administrators. Over the past two decades, various schemes have been proposed to rescue the mill and bring it back into use. Sadly, all the schemes have proved entirely worthless.

However, in 1996, local people formed the Manningham Mills Community Association, and through their efforts part of the mill has been rescued for community use. They also launched an intensive consultation exercise, and in October 1998, the community association launched its plan, entitled "Community Regeneration and Manningham Mills".

Things have moved on since then. In December 1999, a trust and a shadow board consisting of effective and able people were formed. I had the pleasure of chairing the meeting and launching that shadow board. It is hoped that the trust board will be formalised in

[Mr. Singh]

September. In addition, a business plan has been drawn up—which I have seen—that shows that the mill can become self-financing. Both the private and public sectors have shown considerable interest in using the mill. However, the real problem preventing that interest from being realised is the state of the building, which is in a rapid process of deterioration. A lot of essential work needs to be carried out to make the mill safe for use and to weatherproof it. Until that has been done, none of the interest expressed in using the mill will come to fruition.

My local paper had an editorial—it seems to have gone walkies for the time being—that emphasised the point that the mill is suffering from all kinds of dilapidation, and we must deal with that soon. The cost of making the mill weatherproof and safe for use is estimated at about £3.5 million. We have been negotiating with Yorkshire Forward, the local regional development agency, which has taken over the grant-making role and responsibility for such work from English Partnerships.

Yorkshire Forward has been cautious, but encouraging. I understand its caution, because £3.5 million is a large amount of public money. It wants either the council or the private sector to take ownership of the mill. It has yet to accept that the trust is the most appropriate body to take the mills forward. The council has been positive but does not want long-term ownership of the mills. I understand and support the council's position. It should have a facilitating and enabling role.

Making the mills viable would pose enormous problems for the council, which would have difficulty raising funds from other sources. That is precisely where the trust would be the more appropriate body. As for the private sector, no one has yet made a realistic proposal for the purchase of the mills. There has been, and is, a great deal of interest in making commercial use of the mills, but not in taking ownership and responsibility, on account of the amount of money and work needed simply to make them weatherproof and safe for use.

A private partner can be found, but the money is needed first. No one seems able to resolve that chicken and egg problem. We hope that the debate will help. The logjam needs to be broken, because it is leading to inordinate and damaging delay. Each day of delay leads to further deterioration. If it is decided later that the mills need to be saved, the cost will be even greater, because the time will soon come when it will not be physically, practically possible to save these magnificent mills.

No one denies that £3.5 million is a great deal of money. However, we ask for a hand up, not a handout. Perhaps it is a bit of a handout, but I stress again to my hon. Friend the Minister that it will be a hand up, and that if we are given the money we can save the mills. I make a pledge: given the interest already shown by the public and private sectors, the vigour of the trust board members and the sheer will and energy of the people of Bradford, if we are given the money we will make the mills financially viable. I ask my hon. Friend to break the logjam immediately. Let us stop the delay, and, literally, the rot, and get on with the task of regenerating Manningham mills.

We need a positive, proactive approach and we need to take decisions urgently. My plea today is even stronger because Bradford has lost its assisted area status. Therefore, a ministerial statement is even more important for the regeneration of the local economy in my constituency and in Bradford generally. Today's business plan shows that the regeneration of Manningham mills is commercially viable. We can make a success of it.

Regeneration of the mills would benefit the local community and my constituency, and would be a major step in Bradford's regeneration. It would be a clear signal that Bradford is moving forward economically and looking to the future. The city is bidding to be the European capital of culture in 2008—something that I warmly welcome and wholeheartedly support. The mills could become a major focus of cultural activity in the district. They are an architectural and cultural achievement, a monument that encapsulates the reason for Bradford's existence and reflects the historical changes there in the past 160 years.

The mills rank as one of the greatest achievements of Victorian industrial architecture, challenged perhaps only by the Albert docks in Liverpool. They are probably the finest textile mills that have ever been built. Although their roots are in the past, their biggest impact could yet be in the future. Will my hon. Friend the Minister help me to save the past and safeguard the future?

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West (Mr. Singh) for raising the important issue of the regeneration of Manningham mills in Bradford. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the issues that he raised. I reassure him, as I do my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) and for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer), whom, I am glad to see in the Chamber, that—notwithstanding my London links—nowhere could be closer to my heart than the great city of Bradford. We have already been reminded of the historic associations of outstanding Labour party figures from Bradford and London.

It is important that, when appropriate, we make best use of the marvellous buildings that form a key part of our industrial heritage. West Yorkshire—and Bradford in particular—has some fine examples of redundant mill buildings that have had new life breathed into them. Examples of successful conversions that readily spring to mind are Dean Clough mills in Halifax, Salts mill at Saltaire, the old wool merchant buildings in Little Germany near Bradford city centre and Carlisle mills in Manningham, which is a thriving business centre. I understand that, in another part of Bradford, at Little Horton, the old Douglas mill is being looked at in the context of the new deal for communities programme. More generally, Bradford's rich and diverse social and built environment is a key strength that can help to revitalise the district and bring back the prosperity of its Victorian heyday.

I am keenly aware of the history and grandeur of the Manningham mills grade II star listed mill complex and of its prominent location in the city. As it has dominated

and graced the skyline of Bradford for more than 125 years, I fully understand why the Manningham Mills Community Association wishes to protect and promote its use. I am also aware of the report and proposals for the use of the mills that the association published in March last year.

Although the community association's report paints a vivid picture of the massive challenge in successfully regenerating the complex, it is evident that the association is bringing significant local commitment and enthusiasm to the search for new uses for the mills that can sustain their life in the millennium. I am impressed by fact that the community achieved, via a 72-hour challenge in 1997, a complete voluntary makeover of the ground floor space of the south mill. The association is also active in ensuring that local people have a say in the plans to develop the mills and that the building is kept on the agenda for local policy makers and the media.

Although Manningham mills are an important focus of the local community, I am pleased that much good work is being done in the wider area around the mills by the Manningham and Girlington regeneration partnership. The partnership is currently delivering a seven-year scheme, which has attracted nearly £10 million from single regeneration budget funding to revitalise the area. The current financial year is the third year of the programme. It is expected to be matched by £12 million of public and private sector leverage. We welcome that level of financial input.

The programme will play a vital role in regenerating the area surrounding the mills. It has a challenging agenda, aiming to raise the level of education attained by the area's young people, which, in some cases, is less than half the national average, and to reduce by half the level of unemployment among young people, which is currently 30 per cent. Achieving those aims will be crucial to revitalising not only the Manningham area, but Bradford as a whole.

A key strength of the Manningham and Girlington regeneration partnership is the way in which it puts young people at the heart of the scheme and engages their active involvement. A youth partnership has been established; it has four places on the main partnership board and has real responsibilities for funding and programme management. Projects include community policing, help for young drug users, and new training and work experience opportunities for the young employed, including customised modern apprenticeship schemes in construction and health service occupations. I am sure that those projects and others like them will go a long way to tackle the problems facing the neighbourhood.

The Manningham mills complex is split into two distinct parts: the south mill and the north mill. The north mill has a variety of uses already and is not part of the current discussion. However, the south mill has been vacant for many years and various proposals have been made for its development, all of which have proved unsuccessful, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, West pointed out.

Most proposals made for regenerating the south mill in the past have been instigated by the private sector. However, because of the complex's sheer size—38,000 sq m—and the extent of its dilapidation, the private sector has been unable to raise the necessary finance and the proposals have failed. If local regeneration is to work, it is essential that the private sector is fully involved and committed as an active partner. Construction firms can target local people for training and jobs and, if the Manningham mills complex is to succeed, I would like to see a focus on local labour and supply chains. Banks, and agencies such as the Prince's Youth Business Trust, can help people with self-employment. Digging into the potential of the community brings out great entrepreneurial spirit, which can spark ideas to breathe new life into community facilities.

Perhaps one of the greatest impediments to regenerating the mill complex is the scale of the initial works required to arrest the deterioration of the property and to make it wind and watertight. Yorkshire Forward, the regional development agency for Yorkshire and the Humber, and Bradford council have agreed that an attempt should be made to bring the complex into public ownership, to carry out works to arrest further deterioration and to create a development platform that could be offered on the market as a development opportunity. The necessary initial works—making the complex more attractive to the private sector—will require investment of about £3 million. By any measure, that is a substantial public investment.

To facilitate the process, the council would acquire the building from the administrator and carry out the necessary works to create the development opportunity, with the assistance of 100 per cent. funding from Yorkshire Forward. The council and Yorkshire Forward have worked together for some time on the scheme. Various preliminary works have been completed, including a full structural survey of the buildings and a site investigation. A report has been completed outlining the works required, which include selective demolition to improve circulating space, new roofing to some of the better parts of the building, temporary roofing elsewhere, re-glazing and drainage repairs.

Mr. Singh: Most of what my hon. Friend says is true—the money is there—but the problem is that Bradford council does not want permanent, long-term ownership of the mills. We feel that the trust would be best placed to take over such ownership. That is a sticking point.

Mr. Hill: I assure my hon. Friend that I propose to talk about the trust in due course if I have time.

In tandem with essential work, Yorkshire Forward is co-ordinating a targeted marketing exercise to identify a developer or end user who would be prepared to formally commit to the continuing regeneration of the whole complex or a substantial part of it. Consultants hope to advertise in journals over the next month. Identifying a developer or end user must be an integral part of justifying major public investment. Putting £3 million into the complex, for it then to remain vacant and fall into disrepair again, would not provide the long-term sustainable future for the mills that we all want them to have. Also, testing the market's response would help to suggest any additional public funding that may be required to complete the complex's regeneration.

[Mr. Hill]

I am aware of the strong local feeling that the complex should not be allowed to deteriorate further; my hon. Friend expressed that eloquently. The concern is that regeneration should take place as soon as possible. However—very important—Yorkshire Forward has a public duty to ensure that it makes the most efficient and sustainable use of the public resources awarded to it. Alongside that, I understand that the recently launched Manningham Mills Trust, with which my hon. Friend is so closely involved, is finalising a business plan for regenerating the complex, albeit with the intention of calling on Yorkshire Forward to contribute the necessary funding for the plan. Yorkshire Forward has great respect for the trust and will give serious consideration to its proposals when they are finalised.

At the end of last year, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was pleased to receive Yorkshire Forward's regional economic strategy to bring about such regeneration over the next 10 years. In that context, Bradford is facing particular challenges and opportunities and Yorkshire Forward is working in partnership with the city council and the private sector to inject confidence and investment into the city centre. Development proposals include assisting with site assembly and infrastructure works associated with the redevelopment and expansion of the retail area, and assisting with the mixed-use redevelopment of the Little Germany area of the city centre through site and building purchase and assembly. A new company, the Little Germany Urban Village Company Ltd., has recently been set up with the assistance of Yorkshire Forward to drive forward and oversee the regeneration of the area. Investing in the city centre and working closely with the single regeneration budget and other programmes is one way of ensuring that deprived local communities adjacent to the city, such as Manningham, have wider access to education and training initiatives.

In conclusion, I fully appreciate the issues raised by the regeneration of Manningham mills, in particular the need to harness the powerful presence of the mills, to find a committed developer and end user and—most important—to achieve all that by putting together a sustainable funding package. I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are putting in place a range of policies to assist in the achievement of those aims as well as the economic recovery of the area.

The wider partnership in which the private sector is fully involved must be in the driving seat, with the aim of finding an acceptable and sustainable solution. I welcome the work that Yorkshire Forward, together with the city council, is carrying out to determine how that can best be achieved. The regional development agencies are already strengthening the power of the regions to become economic powerhouses in their own right. We need to get people off benefits and into work so that they can make a lasting contribution to their communities. We must constantly ensure that our programmes remain relevant to local needs and continue to create a real and lasting impact.

I congratulate my hon. Friend again on raising this important matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 April 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Newspaper and Magazine Recycling

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

9.30 am

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): The Government will soon publish their waste strategy after much consultation in recent months and, indeed, since the general election. Hon. Members will be aware that the strategy contains seven broad principles, including a greater emphasis on recycling and energy recovery, increased public involvement in the re-use and recycling of household waste, the need for challenging but realistic targets, a strong emphasis on waste minimisation, and a need to change the perception of the waste hierarchy. The final two principles are the more creative use of economic incentives, with which I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will deal, and increased public involvement in the decision-making process. I hope that the targets that will be set for recycling a range of materials will ultimately ensure that our nation becomes one of the best in Europe in that respect.

The Government strategy will include targets for increasing the recycled content of newspapers and magazines. Today's debate is, therefore, opportune. It is opportune for many of us, as politicians, because no group of people in this country is guiltier of producing reams and reams of printed material and because of references to our various doings in the newspapers. In a sense, therefore, we are culpable for some of the problems with which society is trying to grapple.

One of my earliest recollections is of my first proper job as a newspaper boy back in the 1960s. I recall the huge number of newspapers that were delivered in the area for which I was responsible. Nowadays, households probably buy fewer newspapers, but they are much bulkier and there are far more free sheets. The volume and weight of newspapers that drop through the letterboxes of North-West Leicestershire in the early years of this century are probably two to three times greater than when I was a paid employee 40 years ago.

I am sorry that the several key discussions that have taken place about the recycled content of newsprint have been in camera. I will not say that they were in smoke-filled rooms, because I know of the millennium resolution of my hon. Friend the Minister. However, I will press him to throw open the doors to let in some light and air. Are we not now in the brave new world of a nation on the brink of having freedom of information legislation? Let my hon. Friend's actions be the first sign of that advance.

The Government and the Newspaper Publishers Association are discussing appropriate targets for the amount of recycled paper in newspapers. However, I regret to say that those discussions hardly include all the bodies with an interest in such matters. The 100 or so hon. Members who signed early-day motion 17 in support of mandatory newspaper and magazine recycling targets were contacted by the NPA and asked to consider taking their names off the early-day motion—indeed, one or two of them did. However, when other hon. Members asked the NPA for more information, including a copy of the report that was submitted to the Government in June 1999 on targets for recycled content, their requests were declined. I hope to hear from the Minister that discussions will now broaden and that the June 1999 report can, and will, be made public.

The Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill is progressing through the House and is likely soon to be in Committee, which will provide another forum for debate. That Bill stipulates targets for recycled newsprint and for collecting and recycling newspapers and magazines, and it would require newspaper and magazine publishers to meet mandatory targets to collect and recycle 65 per cent. of the volume of paper that they put into the market by 2016. Publishers would have to ensure that the recycled content of newsprint increased to 80 per cent. by 2010 and meet two interim targets within that period. I commend that Bill and those targets.

What is the desirability and achievability of strong targets from the perspective of producer responsibility? The Government are right to support producer responsibility. Making producers responsible for their products from cradle to grave, or in this case printing hall to church hall, ensures that they are made more aware of the need to make goods more durable, repairable and easily recyclable. That also ensures that local authority funding for recycling comes from the product manufacturers, who produce the first form of what is ultimately waste.

Such requirements also comply with the polluter pays principle, which the Government and the two main Opposition parties support. A Conservative Government first introduced producer responsibility legislation with the packaging regulations, on which they deserve warm congratulations. Those regulations provide that 26 per cent. of packaging should be recycled by, I believe, the end of next year. Increasingly, that target means that packaging companies and retailers need to help, support and invest in local authority recycling schemes. The regulations also give an incentive to packaging designers to plan for recycling and to minimise the amount of packaging.

Those regulations implement a European directive that is likely to be reviewed soon, when its recycling targets may be set higher, which is a most welcome development. I am afraid to say that the United Kingdom has an abysmal record of recycling packaging and is far behind its European neighbours. For example, Sweden recycles 84 per cent. of its glass and Germany recycles 81 per cent., but the United Kingdom recycles only 24 per cent. Switzerland recycles 89 per cent. of its aluminium cans and Finland recycles 84 per cent., but we recycle only 38 per cent. The picture is the same for steel cans.

Those figures are not due to the fact that people in other countries care more about the environment than the British people do. We are as green minded as anyone. They are due to the fact that those countries have invested in recycling schemes. The Government backed a recent European initiative to ensure that car

[Mr. David Taylor]

producers pay for car recycling, and they continue to tackle the excessive prices charged to consumers in this country. Therefore, the Government are making cars greener and ensuring that consumers are not ripped off by retailers who think that they are too green in the other sense of the word.

Mandatory targets for newspaper and magazine recycling aim to make producers, newspapers and magazines responsible for sharing the cost of increasing the amount of recycling. Targets would also help the United Kingdom to meet its obligations to divert waste from landfill under the landfill directive. They would introduce producer responsibility and help to make the polluter pay, thereby reducing the burden on local authorities and council tax payers.

My constituency is a former mining area, containing wasteland and voids that are attractive to landfill operators. I represent 85,000 people in North-West Leicestershire and I know how vulnerable we are to the requirements of the waste disposal industry. The impact on our environment and the local economy, and the social impact of excessive landfill can be very damaging, so mandatory targets are important. It is particularly important that all newspapers and magazines share such a responsibility, so that no section of the industry is given advantages. We could introduce regulations that set thresholds, so that smaller publishers are protected from excessive costs, as happened with the packaging regulations introduced by the previous Administration.

A producer responsibility for newspaper and magazine publishers to collect and recycle 65 per cent. by 2016 seems reasonable. In fact, that target is precisely in line with the landfill directive that requires the UK to reduce household biodegradable waste, such as paper, going to landfill by 65 per cent. by 2016. Sixty-five per cent. sounds ambitious and it is a laudable target, but it still leaves us far behind our European neighbours. A recent report from the European Commission said that

Recovery rates reach 80 per cent. and even more in Austria, Sweden and Switzerland, but collections in Southern Europe and the UK still clearly lag behind.

That is a source of much regret and an area in which Government action can make a difference. However, 65 per cent. would be a start. I am interested to hear from hon. Members whether they believe that higher targets would be better and achievable. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm the Government's position on producer responsibility? Do they think that it is appropriate for newspapers and magazines to be brought under the concept, together with the packaging industry?

What about the targets for the recycled content of newsprint? The regulatory impact assessment for the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill stated that the newspaper industry is confident that it can reach the target of 65 per cent. recycled paper by 2003. I am encouraged to hear that Ian Broxup, who is the finance director for Aylesford Newsprint—the largest paper reprocessor in the United Kingdom—and a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw), recently told the publication *Materials Recycling Week* that a recycled content target of 80 per cent. by 2010

looks ambitious but might be achievable.

At present, the Aylesford Newsprint mill in Kent is producing 100 per cent. recycled content newsprint, which performs as well as, if not better than, virgin newsprint. The company can do that because about 30 per cent. of its feedstock is magazines, which have a high virgin fibre content. The suggested targets for collection and recycling include magazines as well as newspapers, so the continuing production of 100 per cent. recycled newsprint is rendered possible.

Mandatory recycling would put newspaper and magazine recyling on a stronger footing, guarantee that the necessary investment was made and therefore bring about employment, economic and environmental benefits from improved resource use.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I am interested to hear about what goes on in Aylesford. On a related subject, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the good environmental practice of recycling paper in Aylesford will be fully subject to the energy tax announced in the Budget?

Mr. Taylor: I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford may wish to comment on that matter. I cannot do so at this stage.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Aylesford Newsprint has a combined heat and power plant and will therefore be exempt.

Mr. Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. Does my hon. Friend the Minister support targets, either in principle or those in the Bill? I believe that he should. Knowing his environmental credentials, I believe that he will fight for them.

The logging of ancient forests is a matter of concern to many environmentalists. The benefits of boosting newspaper and magazine recyling through challenging targets are manifold. Forests and biodiversity would be the first to benefit. The paper industry claims that newsprint comes solely from sustainably managed forests, but I regret that that is not always the case.

The United Kingdom produces 2.35 million tonnes of newsprint per year, which is predicted to increase by at least 1 per cent. per annum. About 60 per cent. of newsprint is imported—it is mainly manufactured from virgin fibre. Imported newsprint comes mainly from Scandinavia and Canada, with a small amount coming from central and southern Europe.

According to the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, about 1,700 forest species are threatened or even face extinction due to the methods used by the Swedish forest industry. Swedish parliamentary auditors noted that old growth forests, containing threatened species, continue to be logged and stated that there are insufficient resources for forest protection. Species under threat from logging practices in Sweden include the brown bear, the Ural owl, the capercaillie and the golden eagle.

The situation is similar in Finland. Although two thirds of that country is covered in forest, only 5 per cent. of that is old growth or ancient forest, most of which is in the northern provinces of Oulu and Lapland and the eastern province of North Karelia. However, the remaining 5 per cent. continues to be logged. Species at risk there include the flying squirrel and magnificent birds such as the golden eagle. That situation is mirrored in Norway, where an ever-diminishing proportion of ancient forest remains. Its coastal rain forest is one of the most threatened ecosystems in the world.

In Canada, the natural environment is being damaged at an ever-accelerated rate. According to Environment Canada, about 90 per cent. of all logging takes place in previously unlogged primary forest areas. Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Quebec and British Columbia all tell the same tale. New Brunswick, more than any other province, has brought its forest into full industrial production. The cougar and wolf have all but disappeared. The Canadian lynx is on the provincial endangered list, woodland caribou have been exterminated, and the pine marten and the fisher are in decline.

Sometimes, people ask, "Does logging really relate to us?" Interestingly, wood from old growth forests logged in Finland is bought by companies such as UPA-Kymmene, the owner of the Shotton newspaper production plant in Flintshire, Wales. In Norway, the major forest products company is Norske Skog, which produces newsprint for the UK market and has been known to supply *The Sun, The Mirror, The Express, The Times, The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

In Canada, Abitibi Price, the owners of Bridgewater newsprint mill in the UK, have considered clear cutting the fragile forests in remote northern Labrador, threatening the livelihood of the Innuit people. Ancient forests are logged—logged for us—and some end up, absurdly and tragically, as part of wholly disposable newspapers and magazines. One of the answers has to be increased recycling, which would reduce the devastating effect on our environment for many generations to come.

In her book, "At the Cutting Edge: The Crisis in Canada's Forests", Elizabeth May states:

> One encouraging sign that could lead to reduced pressure on the forests is the move to recycle paper. Driven by consumer demands, primarily from US customers, a number of Quebec mills are installing de-inking facilities in order to process newspapers into paper.

So it is not all doom and gloom; some progress is being made. There are some hopeful signs in Canada and Scandinavia.

Recycling waste paper also leads to fewer greenhouse gas emissions than the alternatives of landfill and incineration, so it helps to combat dangerous climate change. Only last month, the British Newsprint Manufacturers Association said that recycling old newspapers is cheaper and environmentally preferable to incineration, helps to displace newsprint imports and generates more jobs. Expanded newspaper recycling would indeed bring about benefits for jobs and for the wider economy. According to a report commissioned by Friends of the Earth, the targets in the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill would lead to expansion of the UK paper industry, creating about 2,000 new jobs by 2010 and would reduce our import bill by about £175 million by the same date.

At present, local authorities' recycling targets and achievements are too low. More than 10 years ago, in one of their periodic fits of environmental awareness, the previous Government set a recycling target of a quarter of our rubbish by 2000. However, the average figure for local authorities is 8.9 per cent. North West Leicestershire, my local authority, recycles just 6.7 per cent of its waste. The Minister's borough—the fair borough of Lambeth over the water—recycles only 7.7 per cent. Much more needs to be done at local authority level.

The idea of newspaper and magazine recycling is strongly supported by all readers. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, North-West (Dr. Naysmith) received more than 700 letters from individuals and organisations in a matter of weeks persuading him to adopt newspaper and magazine recycling as his ballot Bill at the end of last year. Pressure groups can encourage people to write, but people respond in such substantial numbers only on issues that are close to their hearts.

The mandatory targets for newspaper and magazine recycling are well supported in the House. I referred earlier to the fact that almost 300 hon. Members signed early-day motion 17 in support of stronger targets. The list of supporters grows daily. It already includes well over 60 local authorities and industry bodies such as the Independent Waste Paper Processors Association, Waste Watch, the Community Recycling Network and Friends of the Earth.

I hope that I have given an idea of the importance of this issue. It is important socially, environmentally and economically. I have four questions for the Minister. First, do the Government believe that mandatory targets are important for the recycled content of newsprint and, if so, at what level? Secondly, will they introduce producer responsibility in the newspaper and magazine industry? Thirdly, will they ensure that targets are reviewed periodically and that new and more challenging targets are set when earlier ones have been complied with? Finally, when will the Government open out the discussion with the NPA and make available a copy of the NPA's report to the Government of June 1999?

In his acceptance speech for his second, richly deserved Green Ribbon award earlier this year, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment said that one of his future aims was for

> there to be a revolution in the way we handle waste.

Strong targets for newspaper and magazine recycling will herald the start of that revolution. I hope that today's debate will be seen as a key stage in its achievement.

9.53 am

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on securing an extremely important debate? As he pointed out, any debate about the paper and newsprint industry is listened to with great interest in my constituency. There are mills employing 1,000 people in the Aylesford and Snodland area of my constituency, producing 1.4 million tonnes of paper and board every year.

[Mr. Jonathan Shaw]

Among the four producers in my constituency is Aylesford Print. It boasts one of the most modern plants in Europe, reprocessing some 450,000 tonnes of 100 per cent.—and that is the best—recycled newspaper every year. That is just under half the total United Kingdom production. The UK consumes about 2.5 million tonnes of newsprint every year; it has recently overtaken Germany as the largest European market. Our growing economy is a testimony to its management. Despite there being a wider choice of available media—the internet and more television channels, for example—people remain wedded to buying newspapers and magazines.

I, too, was a newspaper boy; it was one of my first jobs. Some things do not change: my local party asked me to deliver leaflets every month, and that is still part of my job description.

I support the highly desirable aims that my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire researched and articulated so well. As Mr. Broxup from Aylesford Newsprint said, those aims are tough, but they can be achieved. However, my hon. Friend did not mention capacity, or say how the 80 per cent. target can be achieved. In considering a sustainable development policy, we must also take account of the social and economic aspects of achieving that 80 per cent. target. Without increased United Kingdom capacity, the only way that we will achieve that tough target will be by importing recycled paper. As my hon. Friend said, most of the newsprint imported to this country is virgin fibre, so the life cycle of the paper is as long as it could possibly be.

Mr. David Taylor: Does my hon. Friend accept that about 40 per cent. of the nation's paper requirements are already imported?

Mr. Shaw: Yes, they are. The reason why so much is imported is that the three mills that produce newspaper in this country are full to capacity; they cannot produce more. I shall expand on that issue later in my speech. Aylesford Newsprint's company secretary, Mr. Donald Charlesworth, told me the other day that his order book was full. He could fill another one tomorrow, but the United Kingdom does not have the mills necessary to produce the paper, and until we produce more we will have to import.

If the newspaper industry has to meet the requirement, it will mean more degraded paper imports, which have a damaging effect on the three mills, one of which is in my constituency. The life cycle of degraded paper is shorter and therefore has to go to landfill or incineration far sooner. My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire spoke about local people being involved in decisions; if his constituency is anything like mine, incineration is not top of the pops—there is no campaign for an incinerator in my constituency. I regret that we are likely to have one and I am disappointed that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment did not agree to a public inquiry.

The United Kingdom domestic share of the newspaper sector has risen from 6 per cent. in 1982 to 34 per cent., thanks to a massive £2 billion investment. The industry is playing its part. A new machine to reprocess 350,000 tonnes of newsprint costs £300 million. My hon. Friend rightly referred to the number of jobs that will be created. Every 1,000 tonnes of paper recycled creates approximately 12 jobs somewhere down the line, according to the Paper Federation's research. All the mills are now operating at full capacity.

There is only so much room within the European newspaper market. Mills similar to Aylesford have opened in France. We must grasp the opportunity, because the market is shrinking. We can process only what is available. We import majority amounts of newsprint, so why is the climate in the United Kingdom not right, given that we use more newsprint than any other European country? Companies are not investing £300 million in a new mill because we are caught in a vicious circle. For that range of investment, companies require the stream of raw material to be available on day one. They could not operate for a year, a month, a week or even a day unless the raw material was available when they needed it, because losses on their huge investment would be too great.

There has not been a new machine since 1995.

Mr. David Taylor: Does my hon. Friend accept that if the newspaper and magazine publishing industry was set challenging targets, as proposed in draft legislation—I commented earlier that this might be desirable—a sufficient, continuous and expanded stream of newsprint for recycling would be produced relatively early on and would justify the high costs of investment?

Mr. Shaw: There certainly does not appear to be support for that from the industry. If so much paper is now available, why are not companies using it? My hon. Friend remarked that many of our European partner countries' recycling rates were considerably higher than ours. The reason is that their collection is better than ours.

All local authorities are under considerable pressures to provide services in education, social services, highways and so on. Recycling is not always at the top of their list. My hon. Friend referred to his local authority and to that of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary—Lambeth—where recycling services have a low priority. The reason is cost. Local authorities that wish to invest in a recycling scheme—paper is the largest single commodity to be recycled—have to secure long-term contracts to collect the paper. The paper has to be taken somewhere. All the mills operate at full capacity. If local authorities cannot get contracts because all the mills are full, nothing happens. The cycle is complete. Some local authorities have stopped collecting waste paper, because they cannot secure long-term contracts to make the operation viable.

The problem is one of capacity. Companies will not invest unless there is a stream of waste and local authorities will not invest unless there are contracts. That is the conundrum. There has been no investment since 1995 and the Government must consider the options. The quickest and simplest is to invest to provide assistance to companies to cover the crucial risk period while local authorities collect and provide raw materials to mills before they become fully operational.

The investment would not be huge, but recycling would increase almost overnight. We could then move towards the desirable but tough targets to which my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire referred. Without investment, the proposition will fall. We need capacity, capacity, capacity, with investment and assistance for companies to produce new mills. We would then achieve the desirable targets for recycling that we all want.

10.6 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on securing this debate and setting out the impact of our paper-consuming habits here on flora and fauna abroad. It seems that the production of *Hansard* and Order Papers in the House is leading indirectly to the extinction of the brown bear in Sweden and we should be greatly concerned about that.

I welcome the opportunity to probe the Minister on some key environmental matters this morning. Instead of bemoaning the achievement of local authorities, I congratulate my own authority, the London borough of Sutton, which recycles more than the Government's target of 25 per cent.—and the amount is rising. I support that policy as and when I can.

I want to examine why the Government are taking so long to respond to demands for tough targets for the recycled content of newspapers and recovery of newspapers and magazines. Why are they so reluctant to make public the details of the International Institute for Environment and Development report. If, as has been been suggested in answers to parliamentary questions, it is not theirs to release, why will not the Newspaper Publishers Association release it? What is in the report that must be kept secret, and why have Members of Parliament been provided with only an interim copy of it?

Perhaps the Government do not intend to release the report until they have launched their strategy on waste and perhaps there are stringent targets in the strategy that will satisfy hon. Members in the Chamber this morning. I hope that that is so and that the concerns of the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) will also be addressed in the document.

Perhaps the Government are embarrassed by their performance on paper recycling. The attitude to recycling in the House seems not to be advanced. An answer to a parliamentary question to the Treasury on its paper recycling scheme suggested that it peaked in 1994-95 and then fell. That coincided with the time when prices for recycled paper were very high. However, the most worrying aspect of that answer was that the Treasury was not aware of the proportion of total waste being recycled. The economy is reasonably strong and there is a great deal of activity, so the proportion of total waste that has been recycled has probably fallen in the past two years. The Government must respond to that.

The worst case scenario—I say this only half in jest—is that the Government are back-pedalling on recycled newsprint content because they are about to announce a major expansion of the waste incineration programme. I hope that that is not the case. The Government made a surprising, possibly almost accidental, commitment in the Utilities Bill to generate 10 per cent. of energy from renewable sources by 2010, which is extremely welcome. The only problem with that is that there is nothing in the pipeline to help the Government to deliver the target. There is enormous potential in solar and wind power, but no investment is going into those.

The only quick fix that would enable the Government to deliver on the 10 per cent. renewables target is to use energy from waste as a renewable energy. That would be regrettable because the international definition of renewable waste does not allow the use of energy from waste or incineration, as matter is being burnt that cannot be renewed. Therefore, I hope that the Minister will confirm in his reply that there are no Government plans to rely more heavily on incineration either to get rid of the waste that is being generated or to help to deliver the renewable energy target.

Mr. David Taylor: I share the hon. Gentleman's nervousness about and distaste for a substantial expansion of incineration and I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in limited circumstances, incineration can be a marginally better means of waste disposal than landfill?

Mr. Brake: I agree that there are circumstances in which incineration is probably a better option than landfill, but a better option than either is to minimise, reduce, re-use and recycle.

The secrecy that the Government and the NPA have adopted over the report is matched by some of the newspapers. *The Guardian*, for instance, which has prominently featured a campaign on waste in the past week, is part of the NPA but is not willing to divulge the information in the report. I wonder why other organisations have not been allowed to participate.

The targets set out in the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill are that, by 2016, 65 per cent. of newspapers and magazines should be collected and recycled and, by 2010, 80 per cent. of newspapers should be recycled content. The first of those targets is not negotiable, because under European Union law there will be a requirement to reduce household waste by 65 per cent. by 2016, which will include newspapers and magazines. One could argue that the figure should be even higher, because newspapers and magazines are clean and easy to recycle and are user-friendly recyclable materials in a way that other household waste may not be.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): If the percentage of recycled material is increased above 65 per cent., is there not a danger that the newspaper will simply fall apart?

Mr. Brake: I am not sure what point the hon. Gentleman is making but, as other hon. Members have said, other countries already achieve 80 per cent. One of the countries quoted was Sweden. Local authorities in rural areas in this country often cite the fact that their area is rural as a justification for their poor recycling rate. One cannot think of a more rural country than Sweden, which is already achieving very high recycling rates. Authorities that use that excuse for achieving the 6, 7 or 8 per cent. rates quoted earlier must think of a better one.

[Mr. Brake]

The figure of 65 per cent. is achievable. It is already being achieved in other countries. The target of 80 per cent. of recycled content for newspapers by 2010 might be harder to achieve, as the present figure is 52.4 per cent., according to a response to an earlier parliamentary question. However, if we set an artificially low target, one can guarantee that no one will endeavour to better it. Setting the target at 80 per cent. and establishing interim steps towards that target is reasonable. If the Government and the NPA believe that it is not, we would like to hear the reasons why.

The preference of Governments and all political parties is to enter into voluntary arrangements, perhaps binding ones, between the industry, the Government and other organisations. That must be the preferred solution. However, no progress appears to have been made on this matter since June—or if it has, hon. Members are unaware of it because we have been unable to obtain any information about it. The time for discussions is over. Either the Government and the NPA must formulate a tough, binding agreement with rising targets, or the Government must legislate.

10.17 am

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I want to speak briefly to my Bill, the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill, which astonished me by getting an unopposed Second Reading a fortnight ago, even though the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) shouted "Object." The procedures of this place still mystify me.

I am gratified that the Bill is to be considered in Standing Committee and I hope that in due course it will become the law of the land. It is an important Bill. We consume an immense amount of paper here. It is not only *Hansard* that is a problem; I discovered yesterday that, over the millennium, the equivalent of 19,000 square miles of wrapping paper was used in the United Kingdom. That is unbelievable.

Mr. David Taylor: Two acres in Scotland.

Mr. Prentice: No, that figure includes Scotland. It is enough to cover Greater London, the entire landmass between Bedfordshire and the Sussex coast and on down to Cornwall—and that is just wrapping paper. If one added the amount of newspaper and card used, we would be engulfed. It is almost impossible to imagine the sheer bulk of those materials: 85 per cent. of all municipal waste goes into landfill sites and 30 per cent. of that waste is paper and card. We must do something about that.

Mr. Taylor: That figure is correct: 85 per cent. of waste goes to landfill. However, does my hon. Friend accept that the landfill sites required are disproportionately scattered throughout the United Kingdom? Some constituencies experience major adverse environmental impacts through the failure of industry, especially the newspaper industry, to recycle appropriately.

Mr. Prentice: Who would disagree with that? We cannot just keep digging holes in the ground and piling our rubbish into them. We have to consider the issue more intelligently, and that means recycling. It is perfectly possible to recycle, as the necessary technology exists. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) said, the capacity of mills is a problem, as they are running at full capacity. It is a chicken-and-egg state of affairs. How does one get local authorities to collect more newsprint for recycling if there is not the capacity to turn it into useful new products? We can break that cycle by legislating so as to change people's behaviour. That is why the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill is so important.

Mr. Shaw: If my hon. Friend's Bill becomes law, newspaper companies will import, which will have a detrimental effect on operations and jobs in the United Kingdom. His proposal is not in line with a sustainable development agenda.

Mr. Prentice: I shall be interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister says in response to that. It is no part of my master plan that jobs should be lost in my hon. Friend's constituency. One reason why I proposed the Bill is that it will create additional jobs in the recycling industry, which will have huge economic benefits. For example, many people will be needed by local authorities to collect waste paper, and many more will be needed to manufacture the new products.

Friends of the Earth has calculated that a 65 per cent. recycled content by 2003 would create 5,880 new jobs and reduce the UK's import bill by £106 million; 70 per cent. recycled content by 2006 would create 7,080 new jobs; and, 80 per cent. recycled content would create 9,720 new jobs.

Mr. Shaw: Where will the local authorities that collect newsprint take the raw material if there are not enough mills?

Mr. Prentice: My hon. Friend must not get agitated.

Mr. Shaw: It is a fundamental issue.

Mr. Prentice: I know that it is an important constituency matter. However, I cannot speak on behalf of the Government. My hon. Friend the Minister is paid to resolve such conundrums; I am not. I merely paint the broad canvas, while he is responsible for the details.

I have a couple more points to make. We have heard about the damaging effect on ecosystems of unrestrained logging. In Norway, Finland and Sweden the amount of remaining primary forest is tiny—5, 6 or 7 per cent. Managed forests are supposedly sustainable and, on their own terms, they are. However, there has been a huge impact on wildlife: many such forests are wildlife deserts. That is another reason why, if we care about the planet and are concerned about conserving rare species, we must progress to recycling.

So, Mr. Cook, I shall leave it there—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I am sure that all hon. Members recall that in Westminster Hall the Chair must be addressed as Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is not a Committee.

Mr. Prentice: Forgive me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is the first time that I have spoken in Westminster Hall and I am not familiar with its procedures. I shall not make the same mistake again.

In a couple of weeks, we will hear the Government's definitive view on the matter when the Minister responds to matters raised in Standing Committee—

Mr. David Taylor: Does my hon. Friend share my hope that, in reacting to comments made so far, the Minister will say whether the Government have produced an economic model that illustrates the undeniable link between the setting of ambitious targets and the requirement for the NPA and others to work with local authorities to produce the financial resources necessary to deliver the investment that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) believes is lacking in the industry?

Mr. Prentice: I am sure that the Government will take all these matters into account when I receive a response to my Bill in a fortnight. I hope that we shall soon have sight of the Government's waste strategy. We have a waited a long time for that and I am sure that it will not be delayed much longer.

10.26 am

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): This has been an interesting debate. It is a shame that more hon. Members were not here to discuss what is a very important subject and I congratulate the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on raising it today. As a former paper boy—that was many moons ago—perhaps I, too, should declare an interest. In the intervening years, the amount of papers delivered to one's door has grown enormously. On receiving my papers on a Sunday morning, I typically spend the first five or 10 minutes extracting the rubbish—

Mr. David Taylor: *The Sunday Telegraph*!

Mr. Loughton: I was referring to rubbish in newspapers that one is obliged to read to discover what the Government are doing, such as *The Observer* and the *Sunday People*. I was referring to the dross that one encounters before getting down to the good meat in *The Sunday Telegraph*.

I further congratulate the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire on his extensive knowledge of wildlife. Given his comments, one would think that the whole of Canada is denuded of wildlife, but I am sure that that is not the case. I hope that the habitat of the flying squirrel, to which he referred, is not so denuded that they try to fly as far as these shores. I am having quite enough problems with land-based squirrels in my back garden and I do not want to have to cope with flying ones as well.

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) and I are members of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, so this important subject is close to our hearts. That Committee debates the sort of problems that have been discussed today. Those problems are also urgent. As the municipal waste survey for England and Wales shows, about 22 million of the 26 million tonnes of municipal waste are disposed of through landfill. That figure is neither acceptable nor sustainable. Between 100 million and 130 million tonnes of waste per annum are produced by households, commerce and industry. In some sectors, that figure is increasing by 3 per cent. per annum, despite hon. Members' efforts to limit waste and encourage recycling.

Targets set in EU directives aim for the recycling of some 35 per cent. of household waste by 2020. If we are to achieve those and match the standards that have already been set in many continental countries, much work remains to be done.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire for mentioning the good work that was begun under the previous Government, although his reference to periodic fits of environmental concern was slightly uncharitable. Our last Secretary of State for the Environment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), was one of the most environmentally friendly Secretaries of State, with a great reputation among environmental groups. Not all hon. Members give him credit for that.

Mr. Taylor: I certainly exempt the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal from that broad-brush criticism. It is a pity that his predecessors in the post did not share his interests and priorities.

Mr. Loughton: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be greatly relieved at that. He was the longest-serving Secretary of State for the Environment in the past century, which says something about the emphasis that the Conservative Government put on environmental matters.

Despite the tough targets that were set by the previous Government—and carried through to the current Government—and despite the progress that has been made, there are still enormous divergences in the records of local authorities throughout the country. The average figure for the recycling of household waste is still low—about 7 per cent. It is, however, worth noting that the records of certain local authorities are much better than those of others. Of the six local authorities that recycle more than 30 per cent. of their waste, no fewer than five are Conservative run—Chichester, Chiltern, Christchurch, Purbeck and South Bucks. Of the 15 authorities that recycle more than 25 per cent. of their waste, eight are Conservative-controlled authorities, namely—in addition to those that I have already mentioned—East Dorset, New Forest and North Dorset. Of the 26 authorities that recycle more than 20 per cent. of their waste, 13—half of them—are Conservative controlled, adding to our list Mid Sussex, St. Edmundsbury, Surrey Heath, Test Valley and Wycombe. Coming just below those authorities are many other Conservative-controlled authorities, not least Worthing, my local authority, which heads that list. That tells us about the priorities of Conservative-controlled authorities and about their effectiveness in not just talking green, but acting green.

Mr. Taylor: I congratulate the authorities on that list, but is their ability to recycle relatively high levels of material not a reflection of the fact that many Labour-controlled authorities suffered capping regimes that prevented them from investing in the services or facilities that they would like to have had? The capping was less damaging and less prevalent in the case of Conservative-run authorities.

Mr. Loughton: That is not true. Many Conservative-run authorities—I am thinking now of Wandsworth during the 1980s—found ways of making money out of recycling. At a time when raw material prices were rather higher, Wandsworth council made a substantial profit from glass recycling and directed it towards other areas of expenditure.

Another point to remember is that the vast majority of the authorities that I mentioned are in rural areas. We are told that recycling in rural areas is less economical because of the large collection areas. The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), also referred to that claim. We can give the lie to it. The records of the authorities covered by the constituencies of members of the Cabinet leave much to be desired. In Kingston upon Hull, which includes the constituency of the Deputy Prime Minister, the local authority recycles just 7.4 per cent. of its rubbish. In Oldham, which includes the constituency of the Minister for the Environment, the local authority recycles just 2.9 per cent. The worst record for a local authority that includes the constituency of a Cabinet member is to be found in Sedgefield, the Prime Minister's constituency, which recycles only 1.4 per cent. of its rubbish. Best practice should start at home and Cabinet members should set an example. Only two local authorities covering Cabinet members'constituencies reach double figures for recycling. That is a pitiable example.

We have heard much about the consultation document, "A Way with Waste", which was issued in June 1999—a long time ago. A figure of 45 per cent. for the recovery of municipal waste—30 per cent. for household waste—by 2000 was identified then. I would be grateful if the Minister could update hon. Members on when we can expect to see the Government's response to that consultation. It has been expected for some weeks. Perhaps he could also tell us the reasons for the delay. The Conservative party has fears about the place in the hierarchy of waste disposal that is to be occupied by incineration—we favour other methods. We recognise that incineration has a role to play and that landfill should be very low down in the waste disposal hierarchy.

Incinerators are, of course, covered by the euphemism "waste to energy" in the consultation document, but they are still incinerators and they still have all the problems that are connected with incineration. The proposals to build 130 new incinerators by 2015, while recycling only 15 per cent. of our waste during that time, strikes the wrong balance. I would be grateful to hear the Minister's comments on incinerators.

There are problems with incinerators. For example, their existence does not encourage an increase in recycling because they are a soft option and they require a constant minimum flow of raw material to fuel them; otherwise, the fires go out. A problem that I have faced in my constituency is the location of incinerators near densely populated areas. Brighton and Hove, the local authority that borders my constituency, has been threatening to park an incinerator on the doorstep of my constituency, regardless of the consequences to my constituents. That authority has also refused to include my constituents in a consultation exercise—that is not acceptable. It has been said that that incinerator should bring in waste by sea from the continent to provide it with the raw materials that it requires for fuel—that is not acceptable.

We must find means to deal with our waste as locally as possible. If an authority such as Brighton and Hove borough council wants to be grown-up enough to be accorded the status of city, it should be responsible enough to know what to do with its rubbish, rather than dumping it on neighbouring authorities, as it has done for too many years. That authority recycles only 8 per cent. of its rubbish and charges for supplying recycling collection boxes.

Mr. Taylor: I endorse the hon. Gentleman's call for greater openness and more detailed consultation with communities. Would he extend that principle to encouraging the NPA—to which I referred earlier—to publish the submission that it made to the Government in June 1999? That is a crucial document.

Mr. Loughton: I am in favour of greater openness because it allays people's fears about such things as incinerators. I will later touch briefly on the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill.

I wanted to mention the landfill tax, which was a Conservative achievement. It has, however, been rather diluted by the Government. Under the Conservative landfill tax, the vast majority of the revenue that was raised was recycled back to local environmentally friendly community projects. We now have an accelerated landfill tax that will go up to £11 per tonne in the present financial year. None of the extra revenue that is being raised by the Government is being recycled for local environmental projects—it all goes to the Inland Revenue. That is another example of the way in which the Government use green taxes as an excuse to raise revenue without recycling any of the money to good causes. We should use landfill tax revenue to encourage increased recycling and re-use and to encourage education that will result in the use of less packaging, increased use of biodegradable packaging technology and sustainable sources of raw materials.

The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford referred to my query on the energy tax for the recycling plant in his constituency. It is interesting that that plant will pay lower energy taxes by virtue of the fact that it is a combined heat and power plant, not because it is an environmentally friendly business. We should promote such environmental good, but the Government seem in that regard to have set the wrong priorities in the Budget. I wonder whether "capacity, capacity, capacity" will be the Labour party's new war cry at the next election.

There is a problem with the economics of the whole recycling project at the moment, due to the fall in raw material prices. We must find new uses for recycled goods. West Sussex authority is pioneering the recycling of plastic bottles into highly usable traffic signs, at a fraction of the cost of the aluminium versions. They are perfectly sturdy and tend not to get pinched. It is an innovatory project.

We should find uses closer to home. It is crazy that recycled goods in my constituency have to go to Wales or south Yorkshire to be reprocessed, which uses enormous amounts of fuel and the lorries add to road congestion. We must find sustainable alternatives within communities closer to home. We should use paper as a fuel substitute in domestic environments too.

On the Recycled Content of Newsprint Bill, proposed by the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), it is probably due to the cock-up theory that it has passed through to Standing Committee. I wish him well with the Committee's deliberations. At first glance, the Bill appears to be a well-meaning attempt to spur the newspaper industry on to greater efforts in recycling. However, the newspaper recycling working group report, which has been supplied to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, shows that there are limits to the level of recycling that can be achieved with the current UK capacity. It also demonstrates that the industry has a firm and practical voluntary commitment to achieving the highest percentage as possible within that capacity.

In 1991, the recycled content of newspapers stood at 28 per cent. That content had risen to more than 52 per cent. on the basis of voluntary measures. We use all the UK-produced recycled newsprint available to us. If more were available we would use it, but we cannot use what does not exist?

Mr. Shaw: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: May I finish?

The aggregates tax in the Budget is another problem. The Government do not seem to realise that aggregates are a finite commodity for recycling. Aggregates can be recycled only if buildings are knocked down. Unless the Government are recommending a mass knocking-down programme, they will not secure the amount of aggregates that they require.

To conclude, many questions have been posed and responding to them may take the Minister above his pay scale, in terms of what he is paid to do. Nevertheless, the Government must do more through their "Are you doing your bit?" campaign. They must work more closely with local authorities to develop innovative approaches, and with industry to encourage a more environmentally sustainable ethos in technologies. For all the talk in the Budget about research and development tax credits and help for industry, none is linked to green credentials in green technology for businesses. The Government claim that they are putting the environment at the heart of taxation, but they have woefully failed in that respect.

As Friends of the Earth said, if the Prime Minister and the Chancellor do not do more, the Government's new way strategy will be rubbished. We need targets for recycling that are comparable to best practice in the rest of Europe and funds provided for decent recycling services through money raised by the landfill tax, in particular.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire on securing the debate, but it has raised many questions, which the Minister must now answer.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on securing the debate. I am grateful for his useful and constructive comments on this complex subject. We have had an interesting and thoughtful debate, and I am grateful for the contributions of all the other former newspaper boys—my hon. Friends the Members for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) and the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake). I hope to deal with most of the issues that they raised, but I hope that they will forgive me if I dwell more particularly on the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire.

Before commenting on newspaper and magazine recycling, I should like to place the issue in the context of the Government's wider objectives, reflecting my hon. Friend's wide-ranging speech and the broad canvas depicted by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle, tainted only by the underhand reference to filthy lucre.

The Government firmly believe that tackling waste must be a key priority for the future if we are to continue to make progress towards sustainable development. Last year, we published our draft strategy for waste, "A way with waste" and we expect shortly to publish our final waste strategy in the light of responses to the draft. Both documents are built on the support that we have already received for the vision described in our earlier consultation paper, "Less Waste More Value". The key element of that vision is an integrated approach to waste management. That means that we recognise that every step in the waste management process is part of a whole and should form part of the decision-making process. It means ensuring that all key players are involved, using a mixture of waste management options. Other elements of our overall vision support that approach. We aim to achieve a reduction in the quantity and hazard of waste arising, with higher levels of re-use and the recovery options for waste, including recycling, composting and energy recovery.

As part of the objective of involving all stakeholders, we especially wish to encourage and facilitate greater public participation in the decision-making process. Underpinning all those objectives is our commitment to effective protection of human health and the environment.

Tackling the growth in waste must be at the heart of our waste strategy. On average, each household produces more than a tonne of waste every year. Each year, industry and commerce produce between 70 million and 100 million tonnes of waste in providing goods and services. That quantity is increasing—in some sectors by as much as 3 per cent. a year. A step change is needed in how we think about and manage our waste if we are to make a full contribution to sustainable development. In particular, we need to gain more value from the waste that we produce, while managing it in an environmentally responsible way.

A fundamental element in initiatives to help us to achieve those objectives will be substantially increased levels of recycling. The Government are determined to

[Mr. Keith Hill]

play their part in ensuring that recycling in the United Kingdom is in line with the best practice in other countries.

Our draft waste strategy sets out several goals for waste management in the future. Principally, by 2005, we aim to reduce the amount of industrial and commercial waste landfilled to 85 per cent. of 1998 levels, while focusing on recovering value and reducing environmental impacts. By 2010, we aim to recover 45 per cent. of municipal waste and recycle or compost 30 per cent. of household waste. Achieving the shift to sustainable waste management reflected in those targets will not be easy and will require the involvement of all stakeholders: Government, business, local authorities and consumers.

The Government have already made a start, in partnership with business. The landfill tax escalator provides a strong incentive for waste managers to seek ways of recovering their waste. It may have led one third of companies to introduce or step up efforts to minimise, re-use or recycle waste. We are also taking steps to ensure that those seeking to avoid waste management controls by abuse of exemptions from the licensing system can no longer do so.

Building on the report of the Market Development Group last year, we are developing proposals for a joint programme involving my Department and the Department of Trade and Industry to promote a more sustainable and integrated approach to waste management, and to introduce many of the group's recommendations. We are starting to increase the recycling and recovery of packaging waste as a result of the implementation of the European directive on packaging and packaging waste. Further directives are at various stages of development, covering producer responsibility for end-of-life vehicles, batteries and electrical and electronic equipment.

There is much more that we can and will do. We will produce guidance for businesses on how to measure and report on their waste and to facilitate benchmarking. We are already seeking comments on a draft of the guidance. The "Are you doing your bit?" campaign is an example of how we are already stimulating public awareness and encouraging individuals to get involved by recycling their waste and buying recycled products. We will continue to work with the national waste awareness initiative to that end.

We will press local authorities to complete their waste management strategies and, if necessary, take powers to require them to do so. We will also work with them to develop innovative approaches to stem the growth in household waste, which has been much referred to during the debate. We will also monitor progress towards the achievement of our goals and keep them under review. We will assess progress with all those who have a part to play, including business, local government, community groups and the waste management industry.

It will be obvious from what I have said that we do not think that the Government working alone can achieve the significant changes we envisage. All the key players need to be involved and to make a contribution. The list of those with the potential to assist in meeting our goals is a long one and could include waste producers and managers, waste reprocessors, waste regulators, waste management planners, community groups, individuals and households. In the context of newspapers and magazines, it is perhaps best to focus for a moment on two overall groups: consumers and business.

As consumers, whether businesses or individuals and households, each of us can help by thinking about what we buy, what we throw away and how we influence others. Purchasing decisions can help to stimulate the market for more sustainable goods and services. In particular, we can choose products made from recycled materials, which in many cases perform just as well those that are not. Where recycled products are not available, we can ask the retailer or other supplier why not. Such action can help to establish markets for recycled goods. Without those markets, increases in recycling activity are difficult to achieve and sustain.

Consumers can also contribute by reducing the quantity of waste that they produce, separating recyclable material and composting. Individuals and households can also influence the planning process, particularly during the development of local waste plans. That can lead to a better understanding of the type and quantity of waste to be disposed of and help in making informed choices about how local waste services should be organised.

I have already mentioned the contribution that businesses can make to the development of markets for recycled materials through their purchasing choices. There are several other ways in which businesses can help. Many are already choosing to report on their environmental performance. We are currently consulting on guidance to help businesses do that and identify priorities for improvement. Some business sectors are already developing strategies aimed at tackling the economic, environmental and social aspects of their work. We are also encouraging businesses to widen the scope of their management systems to embrace a number of other aspects, including energy and water consumption, emissions, raw material use and product stewardship, which can all help to provide further opportunities to secure savings and reduce the environmental impacts of business.

The Government believe that the initiatives already in place in many companies to label products to provide environmental information can have an important role, particularly when used in conjunction with other market measures. Providing information to consumers about, for instance, whether a product contains recycled material, can allow that consumer to take that information into account in deciding whether to buy. Ultimately, that information could act as a marketing tool.

Finally, businesses can develop producer responsibility initiatives to increase recycling activity in their sectors. Such initiatives involve businesses that manufacture, distribute or sell products or materials taking a greater share of the responsibility for what happens when those materials become waste. As I mentioned, European legislation has proved to be the driver for initiatives covering packaging, end-of-life vehicles, batteries and electrical and electronic equipment. Legislation is already in place for packaging and the other directives may also need to be implemented by regulatory means. Where possible, we

are keen to encourage the voluntary approach, as that can yield benefits in flexibility and the ability to respond quickly to changing circumstances. That is the approach that we have sought to follow in the case of newspapers and magazines.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire asked me four questions that I will attempt to answer. First, he asked about the Government's attitude towards mandatory targets. We certainly support the principle of targets. However, we—and, I was interested to learn, the Liberal Democrats—would prefer a voluntary approach that allows technical issues to have a bearing on targets.

Secondly, my hon. Friend asked about producer responsibility. Targets, whether voluntary or not, will place responsibility on producers to achieve high levels of recycled content in newspapers.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend asked about the Government's attitude towards reviewing targets and setting more challenging targets. We expect any targets to be subject to review in the light of changing circumstances and, not least, in the light of recycling capacity, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford referred.

Fourthly, my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire and others asked about the publication of the Newspaper Publishers Association report. However, I fear that it is not for the Government to publish it. As the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said, it is the property of the NPA.

A general request was made for an indication of the timetable for the announcement of the Government's decisions on the recycling of newsprint. As with issues such as incinerators, which the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned, we will make our position clear as part of the announcement that we will shortly make on our waste strategy.

Let me deal in more detail with the issue of newspapers and magazine recycling. Some 1.4 million tonnes of waste newspapers continue to be landfilled each year, and newspapers and magazines form a significant proportion of total household waste. That means that increases in the recycling of newspapers and magazines could have a considerable impact not only on the amount of waste landfilled each year, but on the viability of local collection infrastructure. With that in mind, the Government have been working with the newspaper industries through the Newspaper Publishers Association to achieve an increase in the level of recycled material in newspapers. We have worked with the NPA on the basis of a voluntary agreement. Given the gains that that approach has produced, that is still our preference.

In 1991, the recycled content of newspapers was 28 per cent.; in 1998, the last year for which we have confirmed figures, it had almost doubled to 52.4 per cent., which is a significant and welcome increase. My Department has been in discussion with the NPA to secure further increases in the recycled content of newspapers through a voluntary agreement. However, those discussions have taken place in the context of the practical constraints within which the industry must operate. The most important of those is the need to take into account the likely mill capacity that is available in the UK to deliver increased recycling.

Our experience of working with the NPA has shown how we can make progress in partnership with businesses and other stakeholders to achieve significant gains in waste management. I hope that our waste strategy will provide a framework for similar partnerships elsewhere—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hill: I am afraid that I do not have time to give way.

Without those partnerships, we shall find it much more difficult to achieve the vision that I have outlined for our waste strategy.

Sub-Post Offices

10.58 am

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue on this particular day. This is my third speech in defence of the sub-post office network in just a few months, and it will not be the last. The issue will not go away, and nor will I. More important, public concern expressed in one of the largest-ever petitions to be presented to No. 10—it was signed by 3 million people—will not go away. The fears of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses who are lobbying Parliament today will not go away and the growing rebellion among Labour Members who are afraid for their marginal seats will not go away unless the Government drop their plans to force pensioners, disabled people, young mothers and other vulnerable groups to have their benefits paid into a bank account.

Since we last debated this issue, such concerns and fears have grown enormously. The Government have been unlucky, because no sooner had they announced that benefits would be paid automatically into banks—putting rural post offices at risk—than the banks announced massive closures in their rural branch networks. However, the Government's main problem has been self-inflicted. It is increasingly apparent that the initial decision was the opposite of an example of joined-up government. The Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Social Security had not reconciled their conflicting interests or thought through how ordinary people would be affected, and they had not recognised how the knock-on effects would cancel out any benefits.

I have had the advantage—some would say the disadvantage—of being a Minister at the Treasury, the DTI and the DSS, which may make it easier for me to examine the issue from all sides. However, I have always approached the matter first and foremost as a constituency Member, aware of the invaluable role that sub-post offices play in our constituencies. They are important in towns and suburbs, as well as in rural areas, and they are central to the vitality of rural areas and local communities. They provide essential services to the most vulnerable members of society.

At the DTI, I was responsible for the Post Office. I recognised the national importance of post offices, so I committed my party to maintaining a comprehensive national network. At the DSS, I realised even more clearly how essential the network of sub-post offices is—to distribute social security payments to millions of pensioners, young mothers, disabled people and others who cannot be expected to travel far to obtain cash. If the network did not exist, we would have to invent it.

I was a Treasury Minister before that, so I yield to no one in my enthusiasm for saving taxpayers' money—but I wanted only to make genuine savings. I was at the Treasury for long enough as a Parliamentary Private Secretary and then a Minister—seven years man and boy. I observed that the Treasury had a tendency to make savings in one Department's budget even though that resulted only in offsetting cost increases in another Department. That rather perverse practice is enshrined in a doctrine enunciated by the Treasury mandarin, Nick Monk, who said:

Take any cut wherever you can get it.

That rather myopic doctrine has brought about the current actions by the DSS.

The Treasury has always considered the £400 million annual cost of distributing benefits via post offices to be a tempting target. When I was Secretary of State for Social Security, I was advised that trying to save that money by requiring the payment of benefits into bank accounts would lead to the collapse of the sub-post office network. The only way to prevent that would be for the DTI to subsidise the network, and that would eat up the bulk of the savings. Therefore, the action would bankrupt many sub-post offices, undermine communities, inconvenience the most vulnerable people in our society, and yet produce little or no overall saving. Twice I have asked Ministers whether they have received similar advice from their officials, and twice I have received no reply. We shall see whether the Minister replies today.

The Government's policy is even more perverse than that analysis suggests. They claim that delivering benefits costs far less via banks than via post offices. They say that automated credit transfer costs the DSS only 1p per transaction, whereas payments by order books cost an average of 49p. It is true that the banks charge the Benefits Agency only 1p per transaction. However, that is the cost only of transferring money from the agency to each bank account; it does not include the cost of operating a bank account or the cost of withdrawing money from accounts.

By happy chance, the Government have just published "Competition in UK Banking" by Don Cruickshank. Hon. Members who have reached annexe D4—I am sure that they all have—will have discovered that the average cost of withdrawing cash from a bank by cheque is more than £1 per transaction. The average cost of withdrawing cash from a hole in the wall—an automatic teller machine—is about 30p per transaction. Of course, those costs will not be borne by the Benefits Agency, but nor will they be borne by banks. They get their money from customers, so the costs will ultimately be borne by them, through one charge or another.

Those customers will include the claimants who are forced to have bank accounts. By forcing people to receive benefits via banks, the Government are transferring from taxpayers to bank customers—including claimants themselves—the costs of getting money into claimants' pockets. That is why Ministers are not giving any guarantee that pensioners and others who are forced to receive payments through a bank account will not pay charges or face costs every time that they withdraw cash from a hole in the wall.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ministers have sometimes mentioned at least the possibility of their subsidising the banks?

Mr. Lilley: Yes, that is a wonderfully perverse prospect. The Government have announced an inquiry, saying that banks are a force of evil incarnate, but simultaneously raise the prospect of their subsidising them, at taxpayers' expense, to undertake a task that will, in some ways, be more expensive than the original order book system.

Ministers have not given an assurance that the charges and costs will not fall ultimately on claimants. They have used words such as "we intend" that

pensioners will not incur bank charges—but the road to hell is paved with good intentions. They have said "we do not want" banks to take money out of the pensions of people who are a bit overdrawn—but wanting is a long way from guaranteeing.

The second, hidden consequence of the Government's policy is the loss of trade, which they call "footfall", for post offices—additional to the loss of contract revenues from the Benefits Agency. At present, pensioners and others who pick up their money in post offices spend some of it in the shop. If they receive the money via their bank accounts or a hole in the wall, they probably will not spend it in the sub-post office. Even if the DTI returned to post offices all the savings made by the DSS as a result of not paying out benefits via post offices, the post office network would still suffer a net loss through loss of trade. Many sub-post offices would still have to close.

The Government's proposed remedy is that pensioners and others be given the right to draw their money at sub-post offices, so benefits will be channelled via a bank account to the post office. Clearly, fewer pensioners will do that than currently have their money paid through the post office. Moreover, if they do so, their bank will have to pay the post office for the service to the banks' customers. It may have escaped Ministers' notice, but banks are not philanthropic organisations. They will want to recoup their costs from customers. If banks are unable or forbidden to do so, they will be reluctant to accept benefit claimants as customers.

Ministers hold out a vision of post offices undertaking banking services, not only for benefit claimants, but for the whole local community, particularly in rural areas where banks have withdrawn. I hope that sub-post offices will undertake that role, and I wish them well. I hope that they can make a profit where Barclays, Lloyds, HSBC and others have retired hurt—but that is just a hope. As yet, the Horizon project has no software to handle banking.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I do not disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, but he is being slightly historical. Surely the answer is the smartcard. My understanding is that smartcard technology is up and running—although not fully—and available. How should that be funded?

Mr. Lilley: I am certainly happy to get on to that subject because I attempted to introduce such a solution but the Government aborted it. It is important to recognise that the truncated Horizon project handles only the internal accounting and management services of post offices. As yet, it does not function sufficiently to take on additional business. Post Office Counters Ltd. intends to seek tenders later this year from companies that are willing to write the software to make such additional business possible. In short, having amputated from the original Horizon project the ability to transmit money from the Benefits Agency direct to post offices, the Govt now propose an ambitious new scheme to graft on to the Horizon project the ability to transmit money between post offices and every bank in the country.

When I was at the DSS, I concluded that compulsory ACT—forcing people to have their benefits paid into bank accounts—was a non-runner. It would either destroy the post office network or make hardly any overall saving if the network had to be subsidised by other means. However, I recognised that the process of distributing benefits by order books was one of the most costly, inefficient and fraud-prone ways of delivering money.

Then I discovered that half the £400 million annual cost of Post Office Counters' contract with the Benefits Agency—I believe that that was the amount, but I am open to correction—did not end up in the hands of sub-postmasters, but was absorbed by the cost of printing, warehousing and storing order books and other central costs of Post Office Counters Ltd.

We concluded that, by automating the process of transmitting money from the Benefits Agency to sub-post offices and introducing a benefits payment, we could achieve substantial savings, eliminate fraud and still leave sub-post office revenues largely intact—and that, as a by-product, the computer programme would enable post offices to expand into other areas of business. I still believe that that is the only realistic route. I urge the Govt to introduce it under a different name. They can pretend that they are not doing it; I shall not expose them. I urge them to bring the process back.

Sadly, when the scheme allegedly ran into problems, as all large computer projects across the world do at some stage, the Treasury scuppered the scheme and imposed its pet idea—a compulsory ACT that forced payment to be made by the banking system. All I will say about that now is that, for almost two years, Ministers repeatedly assured the House that the Horizon project would be complete by the end of 2001. They have subsequently claimed that that it was three years behind schedule when they took over.

The Minister for Competitiveness, who will reply to today's debate and who has considerably more integrity than many of his colleagues, was obliged to retract that allegation and admit that the delay had built up only by the time that they cancelled it, two years later. The Govt refused to tell us why the contract did not work and whether there was anything wrong with it, other than to say that there were no technical problems and that it was some managerial quagmire.

I remind the House that the project was based on the up-and-running Irish system for delivering benefits. The new Labour Government have failed where the Irish succeeded. I shall let that be their epitaph. I imagine that in Ireland they will be getting their own back for generations of jokes about the alleged incompetence of the Irish by telling Alistair Darling jokes about the Government's inability to run a system that runs perfectly well in Ireland.

The Government defend the problems that they have got themselves into by using four main arguments. First, they say that sub-post offices have been closing anyway. Over the previous Parliament, they closed at an average of fewer than 100 a year. Under this Government, they have closed at double that rate. Indeed, over the past year, the rate of closures has been five times higher—more than 500 have closed in the past 12 months. That is simply the effect of announcing the prospect of moving to ACT. If the proposal is implemented, closures will run into thousands. To pretend otherwise is simply dishonest.

[Mr. Lilley]

Secondly, the Government argue that an increasing proportion of claimants opt voluntarily for payment via their bank account, which in the long run is bound to undermine the post office network. That is scarcely justification for compelling people to move to payments via ACT, thereby destroying the network in the short run. Given time, post offices would be able to develop other revenue sources, but the Government will deprive them of that time and put the whole network at risk.

Thirdly, the Government argue that extra revenue sources will arise from the truncated Horizon project, which will make good the loss of the DSS contract. That would require DSS revenues to grow at about 17 per cent. a year compound between now and the end of the contract. At present, the project has no functionality for additional business. It may get it in due course—I hope that it does—but it will be quite a long time before it can handle new revenue streams. Those other revenue streams were originally intended to be a by-product of the development of the benefits card system; now they are the only feature. Therefore, the revenues that this £800 million project will generate will have to repay that £800 million before there is a single extra penny to compensate for the loss of the contract between the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. Can the Minister seriously suggest that that is realistic?

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): Surely it is not even 2003 and beyond that should concern us. Owing to concern about what will happen to sub-post offices, sub-postmasters are pulling out now—and finding it impossible to find someone else to take on the business.

Mr. Lilley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the rate of closures has accelerated. Ministers say that it is just because some elderly sub-postmasters and mistresses cannot cope with the new computers. That might explain why a few elderly people retire, but it does not explain why post offices close and are not filled by young, computer-literate sub-postmasters and mistresses. Sub-postmasters and mistresses are leaving the business because they fear that it is not a viable enterprise.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Does my right hon. Friend agree that closures affect not simply the post office but the whole pattern of shopping in small villages? Fifty people turned up to my surgery in Watton-at-Stone this week concerned about this issue. They say that, if benefits are not paid at the post office, other little shops will die too, because people will no longer go into the post office, collect their money, buy a few things there and then move round the town. They will all go to Hertford or Stevenage.

Mr. Lilley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have a neighbouring constituency to his, and exactly the same is being said by my constituents—both those who receive benefits and those who run related businesses. They see the sub-post office as performing a vital role in keeping the community going.

The Government's fourth argument is to say, "We are installing 3,000 ATMs"—hole-in-the-wall machines. Of course, they are not installing them; that will be carried out on a commercial basis and in the most commercial locations between Post Office Counters Ltd. and the banks. It will still leave 15,000 sub-post offices without a hole-in-the-wall machine. Costs are highest where usage is lowest, so very few machines will be in rural areas. Even if they are installed there, they will reduce the footfall through the shops, as people withdraw money out of hours.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): There is also a practical implication relating to cashpoint machines, in that many sub-post offices are too small to house them. For security reasons, a large area is needed at the back of the machine: 9 sq m is required to house them. Physically, therefore, many sub-post offices will be unable to accommodate them.

Mr. Lilley: That is a very good point. I was unaware of that fact, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing it out. The more one examines the Government's arguments, the more flaws one finds.

Following the Government's announcement that they are to make the payment of benefits into bank accounts compulsory, the important issue is not the administrative consequences for the Department of Social Security, the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd., but the impact that the proposal will have on pensioners, young mothers, disabled people and other vulnerable groups in our constituencies. However, far from being the first people to be considered, they are the last and, 10 months later, the Government have still not explained how they intend to cope with the problems that those people will face.

Will the Minister set those people's minds at rest by answering the following questions? Will the shift to compulsory payments through the banks mean that pensioners will receive their pensions four weeks in arrears instead of weekly and on time? That would represent a huge one-off saving for the Treasury, but it would be an enormous blow to pensioners, who would have a four-week gap in their finances. Their heirs could pick up the outstanding pension four weeks after they had died, but I hope that the Minister will not use that argument to justify such a move.

How will the Government cope with people who do not have bank accounts, or who do not want bank accounts? Will they compel banks to accept such people as customers? How will the question of those who are legally forbidden to have a bank account be handled? How will the Government cope with the 1 million emergency payments made every year, mostly to people who have no bank account and who would probably be unable to obtain one in normal circumstances? Those people will need that money urgently, and they obtain it at present by cashing a giro in the local post office.

What will happen to young mothers who have always had the option of receiving their money from a post office and spending it on their children? That is why the money was given in the form of child benefit—as a result of a campaign originally waged, I believe, by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field). In future, that money will be paid into the family bank account, unless, presumably, they open a second account and pay all the charges that may be incurred as a result.

Is there any guarantee that no bank charges will be levied on those who take out bank accounts for such purposes? What will be the interaction between an

overdraft and any money paid into the account? Will there be withdrawal charges levied on people withdrawing money from ATMs?

If the Minister has no answers to those questions after 10 months of thinking, it is because there are no satisfactory answers. Only one answer will be acceptable to the 3 million signatories to the petition handed in at Downing street today, to the 18,000 sub-postmasters and mistresses lobbying Parliament today, and to the increasingly worried Members of Parliament, including Labour Members. That answer is that the Government will think again, and reconsider the proposed system of automating the delivery of benefits direct from the BA into post office accounts so that we can preserve a viable network of sub-post offices in order to serve the most vulnerable people in the community.

11.24 am

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) on surviving in this place, and I hope that he continues to survive for much longer. He stretched himself by trying to bring to the debate a degree of partisanship that is not necessarily present, and which is not in the long-term interests of our constituents, including those who operate sub-post offices. I am proud to represent an urban constituency, and sub-post offices are as important to inner-city areas as they are to the countryside. To ensure that Parliament and the Government think carefully about this subject, an all-party group of Members of Parliament has been formed, of which I am pleased to be chairman. Although it properly raises people's concerns, it does not unnecessarily scare people about events that may not happen. It also keeps its eye on the long term.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden—as I shall refer to him in today's debate—did not seem to address the long-term future of our sub-post offices. At the end of his speech, he hinted that, if we were to return to his proposed scheme, all would somehow be well. I wish that it were as easy as that. He has a great deal more ministerial experience than me—my responsibility for the benefits card, like for so many aspects of the Department of Social Security, lasted only 14 weeks.

However, I have a tale to tell about the state of the project that I inherited. I did not merely talk to colleagues and read the papers; I visited the project partners. Had it been my responsibility to do so, I would have sacked the members of the Post Office board, who were appalling people. They were short-sighted and partisan. They were genuinely unwilling to enter into a discussion that I was trying to have on how to secure the long-term future of sub-post offices. They thought themselves smart; they thought themselves clever. They doubtless accepted their fine salaries, but I doubt whether they served post offices or sub-post offices well, and I am disappointed that many of them are still in post today. Perhaps someone else will deal with them.

I also visited the project in west London, in part to see how matters were progressing, but also to meet the benefits staff. I was appalled at the state of play. For some reason, they thought that I wanted to be told that, when someone goes into a Birkenhead sub-post office to post a small parcel to, say, Hong Kong, the postage for that transaction will immediately appear on-screen. Instead, I asked, "How will benefits be paid through this system? Given that only a minuscule number of post offices deal with two of the simplest benefits, why has there been no roll-out?" Answers were not forthcoming. My right hon. Friend looks favourably on the development of the project in retrospect, but I would not invest my own money in it. Nor should taxpayers' money continue to be invested in it.

In the knowledge that my right hon. Friend does not want the necessary and proper campaign to degenerate into scare tactics and speculation, I consulted the Labour party resource centre, which I have never used before. I gather that, if one has a bleeper, one is informed when the resource centre has a message waiting. I received one message automatically, even though I did not ask for it and do not own a bleeper. I was jolly pleased that I did receive it, and I shall read it for the record because that is what the Government want. They will want to be judged by it.

The message states that the

> government has made it clear that benefit recipients will continue to have a choice: they will be able to draw their full benefits in cash, without charge, over a post office counter after 2005. No one will be forced to open an account with a bank and for those who do not in the end wish to, we will set up a simple electronic money transfer system to help them.

There will be no compulsion. The operative phrase is that recipients will receive their benefits over a post office counter. We are not talking about a machine from which people might draw their benefits; we are assuming that, if the transaction takes place over a counter, there will be a human being on the other side who will hand over the money.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I am listening to the right hon. Gentleman with fascination, but I wonder why the Minister seems to have omitted in his note to all Members of Parliament, dated yesterday, that there would be no deduction of any charge from the benefit being paid.

Mr. Field: As I confessed, I do not have a pager—so no new message is coming through to explain that. One great advantage of this debate is that hon. Members do not have to rely on frail human beings such as me because the Minister will reply. If the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I hope that he will make good use of the letter. I do not want to spend too much time on it, but many important statements in it will reassure people.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The guarantee that the right hon. Gentleman has just read out that people will receive their pensions in full without reduction is reassuring, but if no income accrues to sub-post offices, there will be no counters left. Is he equally confident that the Post Office network will survive to deliver money?

Mr. Field: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. The world is divided roughly into two groups. One consists of those who, when they see an idea, want to know whether it can fly. The other consists of slightly miserable people who, if they can find some

[Mr. Field]

fault, however small, will try to magnify it beyond all recognition. When I suggest ideas, it is, sadly, usually the Opposition who are supportive and want to know if the ideas can fly, but there has just been a reversal of roles.

I turn to the longer term, which is what we should be debating. I am immensely pleased about today's big and important lobby. For many Labour Members, it will be the first one to begin to frighten the Government about such things as tomorrow and an election in the not too distant future at which we shall be accountable to our electorate. I hope that the campaign will not be negative and that it will look to the future and how we may best serve our constituents, protect the communities that make up our constituencies—whether urban or rural—and provide the best future for sub-post offices.

The letter to which the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire referred—I know that he will make good use of it—refers to Government investment, but there is no such thing; there is only taxpayers' investment. The letter draws attention to the fact that taxpayers are supporting the information technology programme in sub-post offices to the tune of £480 million. Whether that is the correct level, whether it should be changed, whether it will deliver and whether 300 sub-post offices a week will be able to deal with the programme takes us into the realm of trust and hope. I hope that the programme will roll out on that timetable. The sub-post offices in Birkenhead certainly deal with the age group that could benefit from that, but one wonders whether all post offices will fall into such a category.

As has already been hinted in the debate, there is a real possibility that, as our banking system changes beyond recognition, the system that most of us want will be operated through our post offices and sub-post offices, which would be most welcome. One of our concerns about the future must be whether the Government are doing all that they can with support, knowledge and taxpayers' money to ensure a viable future for sub-post offices.

I hope that, from this day forward, we shall think in the longer term about the extent to which other functions undertaken by post offices and sub-post offices in Europe and beyond could be offered as services through our sub-post office network. I shall make one or two suggestions on that at the rally later today. We must look forward rather than back to find a range of services that we can introduce locally.

I hope that, as a party in government, we will seriously consider putting social inclusion at the top of the agenda. There is no point in doing so if the sub-post office system collapses. Although there is necessarily talk about rural sub-post offices, the proposed changes are more likely to affect sub-post offices in towns, because a larger proportion of their revenue comes from benefits work. Therefore, it is an issue for town and country alike. While we are developing the business strategy that we want sub-post offices to adopt, and in order to give them the ability and the chance to do so, we might consider in the longer run giving them a more open, but time-limited, subsidy because of their role in social inclusion. We do not want another handout that people can rest on, without making changes; we want to use subsidies in a way that ensures a prosperous, long-term future for the network.

Turning the clock back is not an option for the survival of our sub-post offices. I wish it were as simple as that; I wish that I could say that and believe it. The future is more difficult than that, and is fraught with dangers. I hope that I have hinted at some of the things that, if there is to be a thriving sub-post office system, rather than one which, as now, is dying on the vine, we hope that the Government, post offices and their leadership—both the unions and the Post Office board—will encourage.

Today, we must take note of the feeling outside the House. I hope that it scares a lot of people. It is the first time that the Government will be on the receiving end of a serious lobby. We must not let that feeling dissipate; we must channel it into a positive, long-term future for our sub-post offices. Putting the clock back is not a viable option.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): It may be for the benefit of the Chamber if I recall that hitherto it has been a convention to call the Front-Bench spokespeople 30 minutes before the end of a 90-minute Adjournment debate. There are only 21 minutes left. I shall do my utmost to fit everyone in, but in order to do that I appeal to all hon. Members to be as brief, concise and pertinent as possible.

11.39 am

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I shall indeed be brief.

I want to ensure that we get on the record today a response from the Minister to the issue of payment in arrears when payment is made by automated credit transfer, raised by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) in his very effective speech.

When we recently moved an amendment to the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, the Minister made a passing reference to four weeks in arrears being something of a red herring, and said that, if all pensions were paid by ACT, they would not be four weeks in arrears.

I hope that the Minister can reassure us on the matter, because many pensioners need to budget. They may be able to cope with payments a week in arrears, but for them suddenly to be four weeks in arrears would be untenable. It might ease the transition to ACT if the Govt said that anyone using ACT would receive payments two weeks in advance, or two weeks in arrears, and so on. I hope that the Minister will give clear answers to my questions.

People are not choosing to use ACT on the scale that the Govt suggest. It is true that new pensioners are slightly more likely to opt for ACT, but the Minister forgets that, at the age of 65, nipping to the bank in the car might be viable, but at the age of 80 or 85, perhaps disabled and no longer able to drive, that would not be the preferred option. Older pensioners will suffer if the Minister assumes that they will want to receive benefits on the basis of an option that they chose when they were fit and healthy. They will also suffer if they are not allowed to return to the system of collecting benefits at a post office, or if the post office is undermined. Pensioners should not have to suffer the cash-flow problems of four-weekly payments in arrears.

I received a note through my letterbox on Saturday morning from someone living in a neighbouring village who had decided to switch her benefit payment from the bank to the post office because she valued its service. I hope that many more people will do the same as a result of today's lobby.

11.41 am

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am pleased to be called to speak in this short debate. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) emphasised that he, and the issue, would not go away. I dreaded that being true, as his speech continued for some time. However, we must accept that automated payments in one form or another are going to come; King Canute is regarded as a fool but historical analysis shows that he was a wise man, as one cannot resist the inevitable. None the less, steps must be taken to ensure that what is inevitable is not devastating.

I discussed the problems connected with the increase in automated payments on two occasions with my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness and was reassured by his reply to my crucial question about cash. I was also greatly reassured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) in citing the new authority in our proceedings, the parliamentary Labour party resource centre. That was more reassuring to me than some of the quotations from *Hansard*, which are less clear cut.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden expressed concern for those in receipt of benefit. Banks will not permit everyone who applies to open a bank account; some people are too poor to have bank accounts, which are expensive to run, except for those who are wealthy in the first place. Some elderly people will never be in the electronic age; the notion of e-commerce, whatever that might mean even to us, is beyond their comprehension. They would probably find a course in Mandarin Chinese easier to understand. Hole-in-the-wall machines, for example, require the use of a PIN—personal identification number. Many people in our society will not acquire PINs and will not fiddle around looking at holes in the wall as though they were followers of some eastern religion. It is something that they just will not do.

Cash machines pay only in units of £10, and that will cause problems if the benefit to be paid is £44.44. Then, of course, there is the matter of the overdraft. It has been well said that banks are not benevolent institutions, and they are certainly not mutual institutions. They would ensure that an overdraft was paid back before any payment was made to the recipient of benefit, thus increasing the spiral of debt.

Finally, there is the point about joint accounts. As the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden pointed out, the payment may be intended for the mother, but the father may think that there are better things on which he should spend that money. It is easy to say that that can be resolved by separate accounts, but that in itself might produce domestic disharmony, which might not be good for the children of the family.

The other question relates to post offices themselves. The point has already been made that the follow-on trade is important. People need to go through the doors to spend their money, not just on direct post office facilities, but on all the other items that the post office sells. It might be asked why a post office does not re-establish itself as a village or suburban shop, but another great monopoly makes that difficult: supermarkets. It is difficult for post offices to compete on merchandise and groceries with such large corporations.

There should be great caution about the strength of communities. The local post office performs the functions of the lost marketplace. People come and go and talk to each other. They may not have that social intercourse on other occasions, particularly with the closure of banks in rural areas and small towns. It was unwise for the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden to say that the "banks retired hurt". Few of us have seen a bank either retired or hurt. They hurt small businesses and customers from whom they so often choose to take every ounce of profit. At present, 65 per cent. of rural parishes have a post office and 5 per cent. a bank—"and falling fast", as the song goes.

I know that there are regulators. There is to be a bank regulator and a post office regulator. If it were not for shortness of time, I would quote my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness on the purpose of the post office regulator, who will monitor and investigate. I am a great believer in monitoring and investigating, but sometimes we also want some doing. There may be a case—I merely float it at this stage—before a bank is permitted to close a village branch, for asking whether it has made arrangements to transfer its business to the local post office. The regulator should have powers to stop the closure until it has done so.

My hon. Friend the Minister said that one issue that the Postal Services Commission and the regulator will consider is the social question. Nothing could be more relevant to the social question than the consequences of the closures of sub-post offices

11.48 am

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I want to say a small number of things very briefly. Almost the entire terrain has been covered by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who chairs the all-party group of which I am a member.

There has been much discussion about money this morning, and there will doubtless be more during the rest of the day, but the single commodity that we most need at present is not money but time. When I say "we", I include the Government. Over the past few months, it has become evident that a phenomenon well known to any Whitehall-watcher has set in. There has been a series of scrambled attempts to deal with a problem that is slowly beginning to be recognised. There is no coherent approach to solving it because of lack of time. If the Government committed themselves to delaying the introduction of automated credit transfer until they had come up with a workable alternative—under whatever name—to the system that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden was in the course of introducing, there would be a realistic prospect of achieving what we all want to achieve, which is to save the post office network, to serve communities and to deliver, in cash and only a week in arrears, benefits and pensions to millions of the most vulnerable people in our society.

[Mr. Oliver Letwin]

Time is the commodity that we most need and the Government should be willing to give it. A delay by two years will, as hon. Members pointed out, save an uncertain quantity. It could be a negative saving, but even if the saving were considerable it would not have a great effect on a Chancellor who has sufficient cash to be going on with.

As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said, the present lobby is probably the first mass lobby that the Government have encountered. Behind it stand 3 million people who have signed the petition; and behind those 3 million stand an incalculable number of millions of others who agree with them. They come from all parts of the kingdom and from all political persuasions and none. It is a genuinely felt lobby. It is not just an effort by a small group of people to peddle a vested interest. It represents a genuine mood in the country. If parliamentary democracy is about anything, it is about responding to such moods.

I hope that Ministers will take away from these proceedings the knowledge that they must do something, but that they should not do anything too radical too fast. They need only to withdraw and reconsider. That would answer the loud complaints and allay the great fears of many millions.

It is remarkable that, thus far, every argument made in defence of going ahead with the present programme turns out, on inspection, to be either intellectually or practically deficient, or both. Not a single argument in favour can be seen to work. That suggests not a deficiency of intellect on the part of Ministers, but that vast armies of bureaucrats in various conflicting Departments around Whitehall are producing to order pieces of paper to defend propositions that are increasingly implausible, which is an inappropriate way to make public policy.

Quite apart from the lobby, Ministers should recognise that something is wrong with the policy process. The Minister for Competitiveness understands, perhaps more than any other, the subject that he has unfortunately been landed with defending. He should be persuaded of the case against the policy process. There is no need to admit that he and his colleagues are capitulating to the lobby. He needs only to stand up and say a few words, which could lead to the erection of statues in his name across the length and breadth of the kingdom. It would be the first time that a politician from any party had stood up and said, "This is the most frightful Whitehall farce, and we are not going to make public policy on this basis any more. We are going to withdraw, reconsider and produce a proper scheme on which we can all agree". If the Minister were to do so, I would personally erect a statue to his memory in west Dorset.

11.53 am

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I offer my congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) on securing the debate on a topical day on such an important subject. It is close to my heart because Shoreham houses the headquarters of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, which organised today's lobby. It has existed since 1897 and has been based in my constituency since 1947. I am proud to welcome the double-decker bus bringing people here today along with a petition of more than 3 million signatures. When I visited a shopping centre recently with some of my local councillors, I never found it easier to gain signatures. Within an hour and a half, more than 1,000 people literally fell over themselves in the queue to sign that petition—a refreshingly odd experience for me.

We must recognise that post offices are not just shops; they are the hearts of communities, on which many other shops rely. For pensioners in particular, they are a lifeline. They are convenient. Many sub-postmasters and mistresses know pensioners by their first names. They help them with form filling and so forth. They watch out for them if they do not appear on pension day. They are an effective early warning system. Post offices also perform a vital service in reducing benefit fraud. Out of about £9.3 billion of fraud detected, only 0.65 per cent. went through post offices. That is in no small part due to the vigilance of sub-postmasters, who participate in a scheme through which they can claim a £10 award for spotting a fraudulent claim.

When I went on a routine visit to a post office in my constituency recently, I was greeted by 80 pensioners who were standing outside. We had an impromptu rally on the pavement. They were there passionately to support their local post office. It was a great community and the sub-postmistress was on first-name terms with them.

This is not solely a rural issue. Worthing, which forms part of my constituency, has 100,000 people and is a town made up of village communities. Let us not confuse this as a rural matter. Many sub-post offices in towns and urban areas will be affected. Worthing has the highest number of pensioners in the country, so it will be particularly affected. Many pensioners do not use cashpoints. If they are forced to go to banks, they will not receive the sort of personal service to which they are accustomed. They will not have people looking out for them. Cashpoints are not terribly good early warning systems if pensioners fail to collect their pensions. Similarly, the people who sit behind bank counters are not especially good at eyeballing potentially fraudulent benefit claimants.

If the stories are true, there will be serious household budgeting problems as well as security implications for pensioners, who will be forced to take their pensions monthly in arrears rather than weekly in advance, as now. We are already seeing the effect of monthly child benefit payments that are made through banks. About 1.2 million people are not allowed bank accounts. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden asked whether, under the system, banks will be compelled to offer loss-making accounts to people. If a person with an overdraft is claiming benefit that is paid through the bank, the benefit will be swallowed up in the overdraft, so people in the most desperate circumstances will have no cash on which to live. The Benefits Agency will not offer to pay bank charges if they are imposed.

We were told—this was not included in the note that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) received—that if pensioners retain the right to have their pensions paid through post offices, the credit going back to the post offices will fall from 12p per pension transaction to 1p. However, the overheads of sub-post

offices are not falling at the same time. That offers no basis on which they can survive, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) said. Post offices will cease to exist even though people may not be compelled to use banks.

Post offices are losing a great deal of revenue. Soon they will lose the revenue from television licences for people aged over 75—they are paid 17p a licence for providing the service. They are losing work to Paypoint, which the Post Office will not allow them to operate. I mentioned the physical problems of cashpoints in smaller post offices, where they are simply not an option.

Many post offices are in a bad way. The Post Office nationally expects to go into the red this year, largely because of the scrapping of the Pathway scheme. Sub-post offices are private businesses, many of which are just scraping along. It is estimated that 8,000 of the 19,000 post offices could go out of business if the changes go ahead. Many rely on benefit payments for at least 40 per cent. of their income. I got together all the sub-postmasters in my constituency recently, and more than 85 per cent. claimed that they would not be able to carry on if the proposals went ahead. I do not believe that that is untypical of other constituencies.

These are tragic real-life stories. One of my sub-postmasters wrote to the Prime Minister, saying:

> I ... am a senior postmaster of 12 years standing. I have survived the last 9 years of recession, and general boat rocking from the governments of the day, through my own endeavours. From the laws and the media publicity in the last few years, my business has become, from a very viable concern, a now worthless millstone, that no-one would be interested to buy from me at anytime, due to your plans and my hopes for a reasonable retirement has now been lost...I am 55 years old and I have worked hard for my family for 30 years and the country for 39 years in total. I do not fiddle the state, I keep my VAT payments up to date and correct each quarter and now I am assessed for future Income Tax, even before I have earned it. There is no logic in what you are doing. Why should I be loyal to any Government, which does not support an essential Community Business like mine? What incentive do I have now to continue? ... If you carry out your plans, then what I have tried to achieve for later life is for nothing. If that is so, you are reading a letter of a future dole queue member. Due to no fault of my own, a Senior Post Master will be unemployed ... You may have the power, but you do not have the right.

That attitude is typical of many postmasters, who now feel threatened.

To add insult to injury, the loss of business tax relief will mean that businesses will diminish greatly in value for people who are retiring. Alas, sub-post offices have become a disaster. From being a community asset that we all cherished, they have become a "millstone" as my constituent says in his letter. They are a diminishing asset with falling turnover and they suffer from rising business rates on the latest rate revaluation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden was right to say that there has been a distinct silence as regards practical answers from the Government. I have received hundreds of letters from constituents on this matter. In particular, there is genuine fear among pensioners and disabled people. There is fear for the future viability of shops and communities that rely on sub-post offices. Three million signatures cannot be wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said, it would be sheer arrogance if the Government did not simply withdraw and reconsider. They should respond to today's lobby to show that democracy listens. We need a Post-Office-based solution of the type that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden tried to introduce under the previous Government. That is not on offer and I hope that the Minister will reconsider.

12.2 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): First, I endorse what was said about the Minister. If he comes up with the right answer today, I will be the first in line to contribute towards a statue—I have a fiver in my pocket and I might, indeed, go to 10 quid. However, I await the answers—as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) rightly said, we must have answers.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) on securing the debate, although I am reminded of people who say, slightly light-heartedly, "I did not get where I am today by doing nothing." The previous Government had many years to deal with the Post Office, but they hummed and hawed and changed their minds.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cotter: I am short of time and I should get on.

We are talking about community and those who have spoken have clearly highlighted it in all its aspects. Community—in towns and villages—is what this country is all about. The closure of sub-post offices and, more recently, of bank branches and the need for transport, when those post offices and bank branches close and people have to go elsewhere, are the issues. We are looking for linked-up government on transport and the other issues that need to be tackled. More important, we need answers from the Government about sub-post offices.

The automation of the system is important. As has been said, automation is a good thing in terms of saving money, but a problem in terms of social exclusion and people being unable to cope with personal identification numbers. Those problems must be tackled. The Minister must explain what will happen in 2003 and how people who cannot or do not wish to have bank accounts will be able to obtain cash.

The National Federation of Sub-Postmasters has stated that benefits that go into a bank account could go to the husband although that might not be appropriate. That issue has been raised before. Today, I received a letter from the federation dated 5 April, which stated that it has not yet been shown how sub-post offices will continue to be allowed to administer benefit payments under the Government's reforms. Its vision is of post offices being at the centre of community life in countryside and towns alike, not of a network shutting down. It states that many will close even before 2003 if the outlook remains so bleak. Hon. Members mentioned that earlier.

It is a matter of great concern that sub-postmasters and mistresses have invested £1 billion of their own money in sub-post offices. The Govt could be guilty of misrepresentation, in that one, two or three years ago, people went into sub-post offices in good faith, but they

[Mr. Cotter]

will suddenly find the ground being taken from under them. That is serious. Many who were encouraged to invest money in post offices are now extremely worried.

Of course, post offices in urban areas also face difficulties. A parcel was not delivered to John, a constituent of mine, because he was not at home. The postman went to the sub-post office in the town and was told that John walks his dog and would be passing by in five minutes. As he walked past, the sub-postmaster nipped out and gave John his parcel. That is a fantastic example of people knowing what happens in a community. The sub-post office service is uniquely a community service in that respect, and it is uniquely respected for it.

Along with other hon. Members, I expect a number of people from my part of the country to come to the House. The *Western Daily Press*, along with many other newspapers, has notably conducted a fantastic campaign to represent community interests and concerns. We need an answer from the Minister because we are looking for something entirely new from sub-post offices that will embrace all sorts of services.

The internet has been mentioned. We are disappointed not to have had the report from the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit by today because it would at least have given us something to go on. The Government promised us a wonderful utopia, but we are now struggling to come up with it ourselves. I am waiting for a great idea, because ideas there must be. We must be told soon what the Government have in mind.

I was told at a meeting of Post Office directors last week that the Post Office is having discussions with 12 banks. It hopes to make arrangements with them for a banking service in sub-post offices. As we have heard, however, the Horizon project will not in itself cover the scheme. Extra software will be required to conduct a full banking service. The Minister will deal with that. We are concerned that the details have not so far been worked out. Even if the banking system transfers to sub-post offices in places where banks have been closed, I am told that that will account for only half the revenue that sub-post offices expect to lose. I hope that the Minister will say something about that.

Small businesses are anxious because they use sub-post offices a great deal. If there is nowhere for people in a village or community to lodge money overnight, it will put them at risk. The absence of banks is another topical issue. Sub-post offices provide a secure area for placing money—without them, small businesses might suffer.

So much else could be said, but I will say no more for now. We have debated the issues well and we should provide the Minister with a long time to answer our questions. I might even put in £20 for the Minister's statue. I want really good answers today; if I get them, up will come the money. I now look forward to hearing tangible, clear answers from the Minister.

12.10 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The suggestion of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) is a clear case of statues for answers. We look forward to the results.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) could not have been better qualified to initiate the debate today. With his experience in the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Social Security, he probably knows more about this issue than anyone else in the House. Far from doing nothing, as the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare implied, my right hon. Friend chose to spend more money than many of his previous colleagues in the Treasury might have wished in order to preserve the post office network.

The heart of the matter is simple. A post office network has to be paid for somehow, and my right hon. Friend brilliantly dissected the way in which the Government are avoiding that question. The Government refuse to accept that one cannot remove the income of sub-post offices and protect the current network. That is why today's lobby is here en masse: 2,000 or more people carrying a petition of 3 million signatures. Those people, like us, appreciate the value of the post office network to the community in rural areas and, as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) said earlier, in urban areas too. The value of the network is especially appreciated by those in greatest need—people with no bank account, people who cannot get a bank account, the least bankable people with little money and people who need emergency payments but cannot afford charges.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead expressed little confidence in Post Office managers. Does he believe that the commercial freedom that will supposedly be conferred by the Postal Services Bill will solve that problem? He read out a guarantee of full payment without deduction. That is important, but it represents only one side of the equation. Although the recipient might receive his money in full, the post office network also needs an income flow in order to survive as the agent for delivery.

The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) made the important point that automated telling machines give out money only in units of £10. The people who are reliant on such machines may want and need every penny to which they are entitled, down to the last single one. Units of £10 can cruelly alter the way in which such people have to manage their household budget from week to week or day to day.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) made a telling point when he said that we should delay until a workable alternative is available. Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) defined the social and practical value of the sub-post office network and read out a powerful letter from one of his constituents.

In my remaining two or three minutes, I should like to deal with the Minister's letter, which he has circulated to all Members of the House of Commons. Unfortunately, it is less than clear about the Government's intentions and it covers more than it explains. I have little sympathy with the first paragraph, where the Minister states that recent coverage has been less than balanced. The Prime Minister was most guilty in that regard, when he told the House that he inherited the ACT switch, which is not true because it was announced only last

May by the very Government of which he is Prime Minister. He may wish to return to the House and correct that. Some hope!

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare mentioned the performance and innovation unit. The Minister's letter states that the PIU was instructed in October but still we have heard nothing. The Postal Services Bill has completed its Committee stage, and it is high time that the PIU stopped resting in the long grass and made its views clear. The proposal has sat on the Prime Minister's desk for some time. If the Prime Minister is concerned about the matter, he should pay some attention to it, tick the relevant box and let us know what the PIU recommends.

The Minister's letter raised a red herring about the installation of 3,000 cash machines. That will not help the people who are most in need—the cash machines will probably be installed in areas that have the most use and where there is therefore the least need. We should protect the post office network. The proposal is a red herring, and the Prime Minister and the Minister are wrong to argue that it will solve many of the problems that we have discussed this morning.

The Minister's letter states that:

benefits ... recipients are already opting for ACT.

They may have opted for it because their arm was being severely twisted behind their back. Many people are being pushed into using ACT against their better instincts and wishes. The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) said that some of his constituents were reverting to the old system and had said that they did not want to receive payment by ACT. They resent the way in which they were forced to use it. Opted? My elbow!

The Minister's letter goes on to say that:

pension or benefit in cash at a Post Office will—

continue to be available in cash. As we said earlier, if money is coming one's way, one can of course get it in cash somewhere, but at what cost to oneself? The Minister says that he wants to protect the network, but what loss of income will it suffer? This matter involves the availability of cash and the source of the income or charges flow for the recipient or the agent who gives the money. In his letter, the Minister did not mention the income flow that will accrue to the post office network. He said:

The amount that sub-postmasters will receive will depend on the contracts that the Post Office Groups strike with banks ... These are commercial matters and it would not be appropriate for the Government to become involved.

The Minister washed his hands of the key issue that could serve to protect rural and urban post offices. Will they enjoy much of an income for doing the Government's bidding?

The Minister condemned himself in the conclusion of his letter. He stated:

it is sheer irresponsibility to write off the network, thus devaluing the properties of sub-postmasters who have invested—

billions in their business. That is exactly what he and the Government are doing. People cannot pass on their business as a going concern because its value has collapsed—they have to put up the shutters and close down. The Minister must respond to the problems that his letter contains.

12.18 pm

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): The future of sub-post offices will be debated in the House this afternoon. We might say that the Chamber is the sub-office and that the House is the Crown Office, and that I am making the first delivery and that another delivery will follow this afternoon. Someone suggested to me that this debate was the hors d'oeuvres before the main course, but I believe that it is the main course and that this afternoon's debate is the dessert.

The hon. Members for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) tried to turn this debate into a Punch and Judy show, but the right note was struck by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and by the hon. Members for Northavon (Mr. Webb) and for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin).

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) on initiating the debate. He is a talented and able politician, which means that he is no longer qualified to sit on the Conservative Front Bench. He brought to this debate a knowledge of the history of ACT and the Post Office. I am pleased that many friends from the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters are coming to London today. I worked alongside the NFSP on the Post Office Users National Council, and still do not see myself as sitting on the opposite side of the table from it. Its members have real problems and are giving voice to the difficulties in their communities. We must resolve those problems in a more effective way than mere point scoring across the Chamber. The whole point of debates in Westminster Hall is that they should be less confrontational, and I shall try to approach the debate in that spirit—although I cannot promise to keep it up throughout the afternoon.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead said, this is the first time many Members of Parliament have encountered a rally by the NFSP. They take place about once every 10 years, and are formidable events. There was one in the early 1980s and one in the early 1990s. On both occasions, the Conservative party was in government. Like today's rally, the previous rallies concerned automated credit transfer.

In the early 1980s, the Conservative Government commissioned the Rayner report. I am not criticising them for that; it was the right thing to do. The report recommended that, for the first time, pensions should be paid through ACT. It also recommended that pensions should be paid fortnightly and that child benefit should be paid monthly. An enormous rally took place in the early 1980s, in which I took part as an official of the Union of Post Office Workers, as it then was. The letters that were sent then were just as heartfelt as those to which the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham referred. The aim of the rally was to stop all payments through ACT. The then Government—rightly—backed down in respect of fortnightly pension payments, but retained monthly child benefit payments and introduced ACT.

In the early 1990s, the then Government extended ACT to cover unemployment benefit, income support for the unemployed, sickness and invalidity benefit and severe disability allowance. Another enormous rally took place because, as the right hon. Member for

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

Hitchin and Harpenden knows, the Government had taken a decision—which was later rescinded—to encourage people to move into ACT.

The NFSP has been forced into a position in which every pensioner who opts for a bank account—perhaps because he or she is progressing from social exclusion to social inclusion—is seen as a threat to its members' livelihoods. This is the third time that we have had this debate about ACT. The issue will not be resolved until we find a consensus that meets the needs of Government, the Post Office and communities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) said, there is no going back on the decision.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden introduced a well-intentioned benefit payments card, which, as general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, I applauded. I saw him go to Eastbourne to speak to delegates at the NFSP conference. If they had intended to build a statue while they were there, it would have been of the right hon. Gentleman. However, as he knows, the card was only an interim measure based on an eight-year contract. It was a swipe card, although the view of the Post Office was that we should ultimately opt for smartcard technology, and it ran into difficulties. The right hon. Gentleman asked what was wrong with the PFI benefit payments scheme. It would be quicker for me to say what was right with it. I could compare it with ANPOST in Ireland.

The best thing that we can do to inform the debate is to look at the Trade and Industry Committee report. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead knows, we tried to make the private finance initiative project work. I am not blaming the previous Government. The PFI was horrendously complicated—the developer was also the financier. The Public Accounts Committee will soon receive a report from the National Audit Office, which we will study with great interest. The Trade and Industry Committee said:

> We appreciate that in such issues, involving large sums of money—

it was talking about whether the Government had been open in 1997 and 1998 about the progress of the scheme—

> some discretion was necessary. Ministers were indeed intent over many months—perhaps too many months—on rescuing the project, until their cumulative loss of confidence at the turn of 1998-1999.

Unfortunately, the benefits payment card failed. The Government had to find a way forward that did not involve the complexity of the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. I should say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, who has escaped the regime of the pager, that it is unfair to blame Post Office management alone for what happened. Blame has been cast more widely than that. It is clear that the Government had to pull the fat from the fire. In terms of a private finance initiative, this well-intentioned scheme was a turkey. Computerisation had to progress in the most difficult of circumstances, and we had to think through how to crack the problem of ACT.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden is undoubtedly an able politician. Had he been in government at that time, he would have taken the same route. The Horizon project—involving the conversion of 300 offices a week, and the creation of 40,000 serving positions in 18,500 offices—is an enormous task, but it is progressing well. Clearly, we must ensure that the project does not go belly-up in the manner of the benefits payment card. Nearly 5,000 offices have already been converted, and there is every prospect that the project will be completed by spring 2001.

As a result, we will be able to focus on the inevitable move towards ACT in 2003-05. People such as the hon. Members for Northavon and for West Dorset have qualms about the timing, but in 32 years of association with the Post Office it has been argued that the network is under-used and under-promoted. In this financial year, 383 post offices will have closed, but that is not the record. The record was set in 1986, when 393 post offices closed. Since 1990, 10 per cent. of the network has disappeared. In a 20-year period, 25 per cent. of the network has disappeared. We had to argue for the sale of fishing licences across post office counters, and the previous Government eventually conceded the point. People are waking up to the existence of this under-used, under-promoted network. As the poem has it:

> But at my back I always hear
>
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near.

Similarly, the move to ACT is concentrating people's minds wonderfully.

I agree that some post office managers are not the sharpest knives in the drawer. As the NFSP knows, some sub-postmasters close for lunch and take half-days off, and they should perhaps consider a different approach to promoting the network. In the past, some Ministers and hon. Members did not appreciate the role of the network, but they will certainly appreciate it now.

In the time remaining, I shall deal with the points raised by the hon. Member for Northavon. The shift to ACT and the payment of pensions four weeks in arrears are crucial issues for pensioners, but I cannot give an answer on that. We must work with the Department of Social Security to put in place by 2003-05 a system that will meet the needs of benefit recipients. It is almost inconceivable that the final decision will make matters more difficult for pensioners who, by and large, budget from week to week. Indeed, the point that was made by the hon. Member for Northavon and others is well taken.

We were asked whether the 1 million emergency payments will continue to be made across post office counters. The answer, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has pointed out, is yes. We were asked whether pensions and benefits will be paid in full, and whether they will be paid across post office counters. The answer to both questions is yes. Either we will find a Post Office solution involving smartcards and existing technology—thereby solving a number of issues, not least, social exclusion—or we will die in the attempt.

The debate this morning has been about reaching consensus; this afternoon's may be different. However, we can move forward together, for we all appreciate the value of the network and the need to preserve it. We do not need statues—I shall be happy with a pillar box outside every post office.

Holiday Insurance

12.30 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate a subject that was brought to my attention by a constituent, Mr. Carter, who came to see me a few weeks ago. Mr. Carter is 79 years old. His wife was gravely ill for several months, before having surgery that was, thankfully, successful, and Mr. Carter thought that it would be sensible for them to recuperate on holiday in Malta. Mr. Carter surfed the internet—people are quite advanced in such matters on the Isle of Wight—and booked a holiday over the telephone. The holiday company, Mercury Holidays, advised him to take out insurance, in case he and his wife were, for some medical reason, unable to go. The people on the telephone mentioned no exclusions, and Mr. Carter took out insurance with Chase Parkinson.

Unfortunately, Mr. Carter had underestimated the stress that he had suffered during the previous months, when he acted as sole carer for his wife. As often happens in such cases, he developed an acute depressive illness, to the extent that his general practitioner said that he could not possibly travel and that he should cancel, or at least postpone, his holiday. At that point, the insurance company was informed and, to his surprise, Mr. Carter received, along with his insurance policy, a letter from Chase Parkinson telling him that he was not covered, because the exclusions contained in the document included all forms of mental illness.

Clearly, that upset Mr. Carter. He examined the policy, but, because it was in such small print, he was unable to read it until he got hold of a magnifying glass. He was then able to pick out some of the issues. He came to see me about the problem because he was very disappointed and felt that something had to be done.

We identified three issues. First, Mr. Carter was not, at the time of taking out the policy, given detailed information about exclusion clauses. The Association of British Insurers produces a document, "Travel Insurance: Important Notice", which is set in the sort of print that I can read without my glasses. It reads as follows:

> Health: your policy contains restrictions regarding pre-existing medical problems concerning the health of the people travelling.

That is a reasonable exclusion. In my other job—as a general practitioner—I frequently receive requests from insurance companies to confirm that people have not suffered previously from an illness that would make their insurance invalid.

Mr. Carter received Chase Parkinson's contract of insurance with that document. I cannot read the policy, so I have had it enlarged. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who is a trained oculist, tells me that the policy is set in five or six point, and that it would not generally be readable by anyone over 60 without some form of visual aid. The "General Exclusions" section states that the following claims are excluded:

> Any claim (a) sustained whilst suffering from alcoholism or drug addiction; (b) attributable to the influence of alcohol or drugs not prescribed by a qualified medical practitioner.

Both provisions strike me as fair. However, it also excludes claims

> (c) due to or arising out of (i) stress, anxiety or depressive conditions, suicide or attempt thereat, psychiatric illness, terminal illness, AIDS, HIV...sexually transmitted disease, any deliberate exposure to danger.

In short, that insurance policy makes value judgments on what is a worthy illness and what is not; it is grossly discriminatory. However, when I wrote to the ABI, I was told that that is not an unusual form in which to frame such insurance policies.

Mental health sometimes receives a poor press. I understand why travel insurance companies do not want to meet claims from people who suddenly decide that they do not want to fly, or whose anxiety about going on holiday makes them cancel, but that is not what we are discussing. My constituent suffered an acute depressive illness, which is as identifiable and diagnostically specific as breaking a leg. Like a broken leg, it gets better with the appropriate treatment. To exclude mental illness in such a broad form cannot be reasonable.

When I wrote to the ABI, I expected to receive an answer stating that the circumstances were surprising and unusual and that the association would speak to the member that had framed the policy; instead, the ABI letter confirmed that that was common practice. Having spoken to the research department of the Financial Research Centre, I am now aware that a significant minority of policies exclude claims for psychiatric, mental and nervous conditions. I have been told that representations have been made to the Department of Trade and Industry. I received a fax from Direct Line stating that it

> has consistently lobbied the OFT, DTI and ABI on this matter and we have discussed it with the Consumers'Association who share our concerns. You may not be aware that we have also discussed the matter with one of your European colleagues, Chris Huhne MEP—

the Liberal Democrat MEP for the South East—

> who then raised a question in the European Parliament.

The occurrence that we are discussing is not unusual and we cannot allow an industry as important as insurance to get away with what appears to be sloppy self-regulation.

I contacted the insurance ombudsman, who was not prepared to examine the general issues raised in my letter, but offered to take up the case of my constituent in the event of his appeal to Chase Parkinson not succeeding. I am glad to say that as a result of our representations, the insurance company paid out—albeit as an exceptional measure. I am even more pleased that Mr Carter made a generous and substantial contribution from the repayment to the Isle of Wight hospice.

I am grateful for this debate, because I want the Government to address three issues. First, information should be made available at the time of a contract being issued; that will become more important with the increase in the number of people who use electronic means to book holidays and buy holiday insurance. Secondly, when information is given, it must be given in a readable form: five or six point is not acceptable; at least 10 or 12 point is necessary for text to be comfortably readable. Explanatory notes that inform people of exclusions do not reflect the policy if they are set in microdot format—that cannot be right.

[Dr. Peter Brand]

The last issue that I would like the Minister to address is whether insurance policies should pass a test of reasonableness. It is totally unacceptable for people to be excluded from holiday insurance, for example, if they are faced with a diagnosis not previously made of HIV-AIDS or a sexually transmitted disease. Why should they be treated differently? I do not believe that people set out to behave irresponsibly and contract a social disease in order to cancel their holiday. This is an unreasonable exclusion on behalf of the insurance companies.

Similarly, it is mind boggling that insurers should exclude all forms of mental illness. I can appreciate that insurance companies might not cover people who merely feel distressed. However, they are entitled, under the terms of the contract, to seek a medical opinion on an insured person's claim for cancellation of a holiday, and most of us in the medical profession can differentiate between someone who is a bit anxious and someone who is disabled by mental illness. The contract that was offered to my constituent was not reasonable. It should, therefore, fall foul of consumer protection legislation.

12.41 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) on raising the issue of holiday insurance on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Carter. He explained the matter well, and it is an important subject. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the apparent anomalies in the ways in which insurance companies determine what is insurable—not least the way in which they differentiate between one illness and another, the hon. Gentleman's description of which I found extraordinary.

I recall applying for an insurance policy and an agent coming round. He had a huge list—as there always is—of boxes to tick. He checked a list of things that I did not do: he asked, "Do you go sky diving?" to which I replied, "No." He asked, "Are you a paraglider?" and I said, "No." He then asked me whether I was a mountaineer, to which I replied, "Yes." I knew that, as he looked at me, he could see his commission falling away like an avalanche down a mountain. He asked, "How big are these mountains?" and I told him that they were the Alps. "So they're not as big as Mount Everest?" he asked. I said, "No, they're not." "That's all right then," he replied and he ticked the box. The process is, at best, haphazard; at worst, it stacks the odds against the person trying to obtain insurance.

The Department of Trade and Industry takes a great deal of interest in the matter. I was a little perplexed when the hon. Gentleman quoted an agency or a gentleman—I am not sure which—on the subject of lobbying the DTI on this issue. I have checked with sources who inform me that we have not, to our knowledge, been lobbied on this issue. That might be because insurance matters were transferred to the Treasury in 1998. However, we still lead on policy on unfair contract terms in circumstances such as those the hon. Gentleman describes, and I shall come to such matters shortly. The Office of Fair Trading enforces fair contract terms generally.

Holidays, especially for a whole family, are one of the most expensive items that we buy. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight did not mention that, but then, he had enough to go on with. When booking a holiday, consumers should feel confident that they are adequately protected. That is all the more important, given that a mind-boggling 28 million holiday packages are sold in this country every year.

With so many of our citizens taking holidays, it is vital that they should have access to adequate insurance cover against accidents, sudden illness, loss of personal possessions while travelling and enforced cancellation because of their own or a relative's illness. My advice to those considering going on holiday is that, if they do not already have a comprehensive insurance policy, they should take one out before they leave. Even then, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight has warned, policies can sometimes be useless because of the small print.

One must also be sure that one is buying the right insurance. Mr. Carter believed that he was buying the right insurance, but it turned out that he was not. One wonders why it is not easier to make the right choice. The consumer White Paper we published last year stressed the importance of information, which gives consumers more choices and so drives up standards. I am sure that the case put by the hon. Gentleman will help that cause.

Clearly it is not the Government's job to tell industry what to offer consumers: that will come from consumer demand and competition. Industry must answer to consumers, not to the Government. The legislation that covers insurance providers—the Insurance Companies Act 1982—does not extend to the regulation of terms, conditions or prices in insurance policies, which define the type of insurance product that is being made available. Such decisions are best left to the market. However, insurers are expected to base their risk assessment of a client on information on which it is reasonable to rely. In that way they will not fall foul of legislation designed to prevent unfair discrimination.

There is keen competition in the insurance sector: if the policy that someone wants cannot be obtained from one source, it can be obtained from another. Too many consumers assume that they must buy the policy offered to them by the travel agent or the company selling the holiday. They should realise that they have the right to shop around. It is the Government's job to ensure that there is adequate protection for consumers and that companies trade fairly with consumers and with each other. That includes protecting consumers from being misled about the products that they are buying and from unfair competition. It may help if I say a little about the measures that exist to protect consumers purchasing holiday insurance.

The Package Travel, Package Holidays and Package Tours Regulations 1992 require anyone selling a package—defined as a prearranged combination of any two of the elements of transport, accommodation or other significant tourist services—to provide certain minimum information, including information about insurance. They also give consumers rights to compensation for misdescription of any part of the overall package, which could include misdescription of the scope of an insurance policy sold as part of it.

There is legislation that specifically governs insurance, but it is more concerned with the fitness and solvency of insurance companies than with the nature of their products. It does not tackle as precisely as the hon. Gentleman would like the problem that he has highlighted. However, that does not mean that insurers are not answerable for mis-selling general insurance policies. Indeed, 96 per cent. of the insurance market is accounted for by members of the Association of British Insurers, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and ABI members operate a code of practice on general insurance; therefore, there is non-statutory regulation. The code applies to member companies and to those who sell their products. It gives the customer the right to see both the policy document and a copy of the schedule, and requires key features of a policy to be explained. In short, important information must be given up front.

The case made by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight this morning should be thrown down as a challenge to the insurance companies. The most relevant points in a policy such as Mr. Carter's should be stated up front, so that people can see them clearly. They should not be hidden somewhere in the microdot format paragraphs at the back of the insurance policy.

The insurance ombudsman adjudicates on complaints and examines each case individually. He requires evidence that important information was made available to the consumer when the policy was sold. However, the regulation of most general insurance intermediaries is expected to pass to the General Insurance Standards Council later this year. The GISC will have a wide-ranging remit, covering the activities of insurers, advisers, agents and brokers. In due course, a GISC code will replace the ABI code. I understand that the GISC is already talking to the Association of British Travel Agents about how travel agents who sell insurance will be brought within the council's scope.

I appreciate the difficulty of understanding exclusions that are buried in a body of small print, especially when that print is very small indeed and the customer's sight is no longer perfect, which is the case with most elderly people. I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's remark about sight deteriorating after the age of 60; I fear that mine started to deteriorate much earlier than that. Although many insurance companies aim for a plain English standard, insurance documents are inevitably complex, and to provide consumers with full information about important matters that affect the scope of a policy it is necessary to state many terms and conditions. In addition, a provision that is important to one customer may be relatively unimportant to another. Many insurance companies provide back-up through telephone helplines that offer customers advice, including advice on terms and conditions of insurance cover.

I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about print that is too small for most people to read and about the way in which some documents are written, which adds another layer of denseness to the text. It is very difficult to get into a text of that sort, but it becomes almost impossible when it is couched in language that might as well be Mongolian as far as most people are concerned. It is very difficult for elderly customers to get into that.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about "named illnesses". Insurers design products against a background of previous claims and ask themselves whether there will be a greater number of claims from sufferers of a particular illness. If so, the insurer has every right to exclude it.

Dr. Brand: Is it reasonable to exclude influenza, because there is a lot of it about? My concern is that, although the "Travel Insurance: Important Notice" document issued by the Association of British Insurers talks quite sensibly about pre-existing medical problems, the schedule to the insurance policy introduces a host of other conditions that do not have to exist previously to be excluded from the insurance. That is misleading.

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I was taken by his description of some illnesses as worthy and others as unworthy, as if people go out on purpose to catch an unworthy illnesses. Life is not like that. Clearly, insurance companies have to make money; that is what they are there for—

Dr. Brand: Decently.

Dr. Howells: Yes, they have to make money decently. Most insurance companies would probably endorse that statement. However, there is a legitimate question to be asked about why some illnesses are on the worthy list and others are on the unworthy list. If statistics are to be believed and the incidence of mental illnesses and the number of people associated with those who suffer from mental conditions are as high as companies suggest, one wonders how people—especially Members of Parliament—manage to obtain decent holiday insurance cover.

Extra premiums are requested for certain conditions. As a mountaineer, I pay through the nose for insurance cover when, once a year, I manage to escape to the mountains. That rankles, but I can understand it. However, it strikes me as extremely strange that an actuary sits down and decides that influenza is a more worthy illness than HIV, even though there is a far greater chance of influenza preventing someone from going on holiday, especially a weekend break. It poses all sorts of ethical questions, as well questions of medical definition.

In the short time left, I should like to deal with unfair contract terms. Regulations on unfair terms in consumer contracts give legal backing to those principles. They apply to contractual terms that have not been individually negotiated, such as terms in standard form contracts. The regulations state that a term is unfair if it creates a significant imbalance in the parties' rights and obligations under the contract to the detriment of the consumer. In other words, is the term one-sided in favour of the business and against the consumer?

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight has reminded us this morning of the broad definition of an unfair contract. If a germane part of the contract is so deep in the microprint that it can affect the holiday of someone such as Mr. Carter, one must ask whether there should not be more transparency, so that the contract is fairer for the consumer.

Controlled Drugs (Law Enforcement)

1 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): There are three ways in which the enforcement laws on drug abuse can be improved to reduce the harm and deaths caused by drugs. The first way is to allow natural cannabis to be prescribed to the seriously ill. The second is to take the soft drugs market out of the hands of irresponsible criminals and give it to legal businesses that can be licensed, controlled, policed and regulated. The third is to treat hard drugs addicts as patients, not criminals.

I have been greatly encouraged by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's announcement this week that his judgment had been wrong and that he had changed his mind on an issue affecting devolution in Wales. I cherish the thought that that was the result of reading my book on the subject. It took 18 months to convince the Prime Minister that he was wrong. I hope that in 18 minutes, and with the help of my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), who hopes to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can convince the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), that British drugs laws are doing more harm than drugs themselves.

Even though the message that our drugs laws are not working has been clear for many years, Governments have refused to fix them. They have based their views not on evidence but on bigotry and mythology. Governments cannot always do good, but we can ask them at least to avoid doing harm. By inflicting avoidable pain and anxiety on the seriously ill, the Government are now doing harm. Thousands of otherwise law-abiding citizens use medicinal cannabis to relieve chronic pain and distress caused by multiple sclerosis, AIDS or the side effects of chemotherapy. A simple change in the law, recommended by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology and the Runciman report, would allow doctors to prescribe cannabis in the same way as heroin is prescribed, in rare instances.

The law is in disrepute. Last year in Wales, two seriously ill patients were imprisoned for using natural cannabis. In the past 18 months in England, six juries have—rightly—refused to implement the law. In one case, a man was carried shoulder high from the court after being charged with supplying cannabis to up to 100 people. The juries are doing the job that the Government have dodged. Judge Devlin said:

> A jury is the insurance that the criminal law will conform to the ordinary man's idea of what is fair and just. If the law is cruel, juries will not enforce it.

Parliament, too, will not enforce a law that prevents juries from acting in that way. I hope that the oppressive measure currently going through the House will be thrown out, because it will deny juries the chance to act as the conscience of the country and refuse to act oppressively against seriously ill people.

Yesterday, the Government acted courageously against damaging prejudices in another place, so why do they become pale shivering wrecks when they consider the drugs laws? There is an unanswerable case for drugs law reform. Where is the courage that the Home Secretary showed on Monday, when he introduced a Bill about the hardest of all hard drugs, containing measures to make that drug, not less, but more available? He was implementing a pragmatic measure in the White Paper, to reduce the harm caused by our most addictive and poisonous drug: alcohol. Does the Minister of State not blush in shame at the fact that *The Daily Telegraph* has taken a progressive line against the forces of conservatism represented by the Government?

As rapporteur for the Council of Europe health committee on drugs misuse, I have examined drugs policies in 41 countries and accumulated a great encyclopaedia of evidence. Two incontrovertible conclusions can be drawn from the experiences of those 41 countries: harsh drugs laws based on prohibition do not reduce drug harm, but may increase it; and pragmatic, intelligent laws based on decriminalisation do not increase drug use, but often reduce it.

The Runciman report exposed the repeated misrepresentation by the British Government, the drugs tsar and the popular press of what has happened in the Netherlands. The report said that the committee was "impressed" by the results of 20 years of decriminalisation in Holland. Cannabis use in that country did not increase as a result of decriminalisation; in fact, it followed the trends in all other countries. Holland now has much lower use of cannabis, especially among 16 to 19-year-olds, and it is used in safer ways and in milder forms than are used in this country. The population of problem drugs users has remained stable, with a rising average age, and almost all are in touch with treatment.

Holland's is a success story: decriminalisation has proved to be the best way to block the gateway from the use of soft drugs to hard drugs. The best way of doing that is to ensure that there is not only one market, as we have in this country. British drug experimenters—the majority of our young people—have to cross the line between legality and illegality to use soft drugs, and they have to frequent areas in which they are likely to be exposed to the pushing of hard drugs as well. The results are self-evident: prohibition increases drugs harm, whereas decriminalisation decreases it.

Lessons can be learned from countries further afield than Holland: we can take into account the experience throughout the rest of the world. In 1987, south Australia introduced a policy of non-prosecution for cannabis use. Civilisation did not collapse. As the Runciman report says, there is now no difference in cannabis use between south Australia and the rest of Australia. During the 1970s, several states in the United States of America reduced to a small fine the penalty for possession for personal use. The rate of increase in cannabis use was lower in the states that depenalised than in those states that did not change the penalties: the states with the harshest penalties had the greatest drug use.

Can we have an intelligent and serious response from the Government on that point? Of the 41 countries of the Council of Europe, the two that have suffered the greatest increase in heroin use in the past 18 months are Sweden and the UK. They happen to be the countries with the severest penalties and the harshest laws. Prohibition increases drugs harm; decriminalisation reduces it.

One member of the Runciman committee went to Holland and his experiences in that country changed his mind entirely. I urge Ministers to visit Holland, where they might learn that our present laws to control the international trade in drugs have as much chance of success as Canute had when he commanded the tide outside this building to go back. The international drugs trade is the second biggest industry in the world. If we cut off one head of that great beast, two others will grow in its place. The only chance we have of reducing the problem is to adopt a pragmatic line of reducing harm.

The current position in Britain is dreadful. What we have—and the legacy that will be left by the Labour Government when they leave office—is greatly increased use of heroin and cocaine. Decriminalisation is occurring on a completely chaotic and irrational basis. Ninety per cent. of drug arrests in the UK are for simple possession; 80 per cent. of those arrests are for possession of cannabis. Sixty-two per cent. of drugs spending goes on enforcement, whereas only 13 per cent. is spent on worthwhile forms of treatment. In 1974, 3 per cent. of offenders were cautioned; now the proportion is 50 per cent.

Decriminalisation is happening according to postcode. You are eight times more likely to be apprehended in Dorset than in Northampton—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. As I am not going to either Dorset or Northampton, I am not likely to be apprehended at all. When the hon. Gentleman says "you", he is referring to me.

Mr. Flynn: I am sorry. It is unlikely to be you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who is arrested, but there are 500 people in prison for cannabis possession alone. This country does not have a single prison that is free of drug use. Cannabis offenders go into prison as cannabis users and often come out as drug addicts.

I have been present in most of the debates in the House on the subject in the past 20 years. They all follow the same pattern: the Government boast of the success of their new schemes; they say that their policies are working and they are about to turn the corner. British drugs policy has turned the corner so often that we have been round the block a dozen times. In 1989, David Mellor said that we could be certain of one thing: that the use of heroin had peaked in Britain; but every year since then, heroin use has soared. Ministers from both parties use the same self-deluding, self-congratulatory line; meanwhile, children are dying in greater numbers in this country than in any other country in Europe. The mantra is that drug remedies are not working, but we refuse to see the truth.

The Minister of State recently said on television that he could not accept the Runciman report because Ecstasy kills seven people a year. That is tragic—the untimely death of a young person is always dreadful. However, there have been fewer deaths in Holland in 10 years than in any one year in Britain. No deaths in that country have been caused by inhalants, and the number of deaths caused by other drugs has fallen. We should put the policy in Holland into perspective. We should also consider the fact that, each year, between 500 and 600 people are killed by the simple drug paracetamol, which can be found in most people's home. If we want to reduce drug deaths, we must look at the bigger picture, which shows that children and the elderly are being drugged in an irresponsible and dangerous way.

The 10-year strategy is a cop-out—an excuse for not debating the issues, not acting and not thinking. In 10 years' time the drugs tsar will have retired, the Prime Minister will be Lord Sedgefield, and there will have been 1,000 more avoidable heroin deaths. A thousand families need not be bereaved if we consider now what is happening throughout the world, amend our policies and introduce the necessary reforms. Prohibition kills; decriminalisation saves.

In the past, Ministers of both parties have found it convenient to blame the drugs trade and the wicked pushers; we do not lay the blame on ourselves. However, the drugs trade does not cause deaths. It consists of greedy people who are out to make money irresponsibly. If the trade can be turned into a responsible, licensed business, drug crime will be reduced and people will feel able to enter rehabilitation. Harm can be reduced quite spectacularly, as it has been in Switzerland, where experiments have been conducted in respect of injectable heroin.

In future, whatever the political colour of the Government, Ministers will not be able to get away with the excuse that people outside Parliament are responsible for deaths caused by drugs. Politicians decide drug policy. Responsibility for the deaths caused by drugs should be laid firmly at the door of Governments' drugs policies for the past 20 years, not on those outside the House.

1.13 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on the passion with which he spoke and on introducing the subject of drugs policy within these portals. I thank him for allowing me to speak for a few minutes. My hon. Friend the Minister of State and I have an issue in common: we fought side by side in the streets and on the platforms of Norwich against a common opponent, Howard Marks, the high priest of the pro-cannabis party, who suffered a severe defeat at our hands.

We are debating a serious subject and I intend to speak about the medicinal value of cannabis and other drugs. For centuries, cannabis has been for used for medicinal purposes all over the world. Drugs can be beneficial or harmful according to the context of their use. Cannabis may be harmful when someone is driving a motor car, but it is beneficial to a multiple sclerosis sufferer. Sadly, legislation is not context-sensitive.

Beneficial effects are being rediscovered because, although illegal, cannabis is widely available. There is no legal commercial interest in cannabis, so little research is carried out into identifying new medical applications. With no commercial interest, it is difficult to secure funding for proper trials. To some extent, charities are being asked to fulfil that role. It is likely that other recreational drugs have effects that could be exploited for therapeutic purposes, although the discovery of such effects is unlikely because most drug research in this country is impossible without commercial backing. The law is a blunt instrument and, at present, it is incapable of taking into account the context of drug use when defining criminality.

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

The medicinal uses of cannabis include alleviation of tremor and spasticity and a variety of neurological conditions—especially MS; increasing weight and improving appetite and mood in cancer patients; reducing nausea associated with chemotherapy in cancer patients; and reducing intra-ocular pressure in glaucomas. Those are but a few of the medicinal uses of the drug. Though cannabis may not be the best drug to treat those conditions, without proper trials and experimentation, we shall never know. Medicinal trials on patients would provide a welcome a way forward in establishing the beneficial effects of cannabis. After such trials, the knowledge would be extended into the wider public sphere.

1.16 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I, too, welcome the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on securing it, although I felt that his speech was uncharacteristically offensive.

I do not speak, as did David Mellor or previous Governments, by going round the block. I shall deal directly with the points raised in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), who is also a personal friend, was characteristically constructive in advocating a scientific approach to deal properly with the issues. Some people argue that there is no need for a debate on these matters, but I disagree: there should be a debate and it is right for it to continue. In that context, I thank the Runciman committee and the Police Foundation for their work in producing a serious and well-considered report.

The hon. Member for Newport, West mentioned *The Daily Telegraph*. In the past, I have not responded to that point, but, on this occasion, I should like to draw to his and the House's attention the fact that the ultra-libertarian wing of the Conservative party is now running that newspaper, which explains the editorial position on these matters, as on others.

Let me return to the more serious aspects of the debate. First, I shall set out the statutory framework, which is provided in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. It places all controlled drugs into three categories—A, B or C—according to their relative harmfulness. Class A includes heroin and cocaine; class B, amphetamines and cannabis; and class C, benzodiazepines and anabolic steroids.

Mr. Flynn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I will not. I intend to conclude my speech within the time available to me.

That classification determines penalties for offences under the Act. For example, the maximum penalty for possession of a controlled drug ranges from two years' imprisonment for possession of class C drugs to seven years for possession of class A substances. Assessments on classification include a judgment on the substance's toxic effect, the prevalence of misuse, and the effects on society. For expert advice on the classification of controlled drugs, the Government rely on the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, which was established by the 1971 Act. It must comprise no fewer than 20 members and the disciplines represented within the council include medical practitioners, pharmacists, chemists and experts on the social effects of drug abuse.

It is important to set out the current assessment of the medical and social effects. A 1997 World Health Organisation report confirmed that cannabis has both acute and chronic health effects. The acute effects include damage to people's ability to learn and to carry out many tasks, including operating machinery and driving vehicles. The chronic effects include damage to mental functioning, especially learning abilities, which may not be reversible for prolonged and heavy users. A cannabis dependence syndrome has been identified in heavy users, and the drug can exacerbate schizophrenia in people who are already affected by that illness. There are also the obvious health risks associated with smoking the drug. That is why the British Medical Association has concluded that cannabis in its plant form is unsuitable for medical use.

I turn now to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North about the need for research. The Multiple Sclerosis Society agrees that cannabis should not be prescribed in advance of proper trials, but, rightly, it argues for the types of trial that my hon. Friend advocates. The Government want research brought to a satisfactory conclusion as soon as possible, which is why we have licensed several laboratory and research projects over the past few years. The Medical Research Council recently awarded a grant of more than £1 million to enable another major research project to get under way, and the Medicines Control Agency has recently given permission to GW Pharmaceuticals Ltd. to proceed to clinical trials.

Those are important milestones in the development of a potential medicine for multiple sclerosis, and they are to be warmly welcomed. I hope that that goes some way towards meeting my hon. Friend's point about the need for more research. He and I received a delegation from the Multiple Sclerosis Society in Norwich. We discussed the benefits that the society's members felt proper medicinal use might bring. It is important to research and develop such a use, and that is what the Government are doing.

Why should there be controls on drugs? The Government have a clear and consistent view of the damage that drugs can cause to individuals, their families and the wider community, and of the link between drugs and crime and the corresponding need to maintain firm controls. I am familiar with the views of the hon. Member for Newport, West on the 1971 Act, and I concede absolutely and in public that he has a long-standing and sincere desire to see the misuse of drugs eradicated. He made that clear again in his speech, and I cast no aspersion on his motives in that regard. There is a difference in analysis, which I hope to explore in this debate, but I am not suggesting that he wants anything other than a reduction the misuse of drugs and their harmful effects. Ours is simply a discussion about how best to achieve that.

Some people have suggested that decriminalising or legalising currently controlled drugs would reduce both the harm they cause and the market for them, but successive Governments in this country and throughout the world have taken the view that that cannot possibly happen. I will not follow the hon. Member for Newport,

West in discussing complacent statements about the drugs problem having been solved, because that is not the Government's view; on the contrary, we believe that we have much to do to tackle drugs issues. Today's debate about the legalisation or decriminalisation of certain drugs is only one part of the wider debate.

Most of those who favour legalisation recognise that the balance of the argument would be tipped against them if consumption significantly increased as a consequence of the legalisation of drugs. Common sense and the lessons of history suggest that that would be the case, and it might help if I outline the current levels of drugs use. According to surveys, 1.25 million people in this country used cannabis in the past month. In contrast, between 10 million and 11 million people have smoked tobacco, and 42 million people have consumed alcohol in the past month. However, the illegality of some of the drugs that I have described limits use and deters many other people from using them. Furthermore, the main effect of decriminalisation or legalisation would be an increase in the consumption of drugs, which would be a bad thing for various reasons. The Government's policy on all legal and illegal drugs should be motivated by a desire to reduce use, whether we are talking about tobacco, alcohol or other drugs.

Mr. Flynn: Can the Minister explain why the Runciman report concluded that the decriminalisation of cannabis in Holland, Australia and certain states of America did not increase its use?

Mr. Clarke: The report explains that itself. That is the view to which it came. However, the hon. Gentleman mentioned Ecstasy in connection with Holland a moment ago, and I have the figure for the lifetime prevalence of the use of different illegal drugs among 15 to 16-year-old students contained in recent nationwide school surveys from some EU countries: 8.1 per cent. of those students in the Netherlands had consumed Ecstasy, compared with 3 per cent. in the UK. That is a significant difference, and the implication of consumption is real.

It is argued that the black market would disappear with decriminalisation, but I believe that the criminals would attempt to undercut the legal producers, and that the United Kingdom would provide an attractive base for organised crime. The Dutch police have told us that the semi-legal trade in cannabis in the Netherlands has helped to make the country a safer place for big-time crooks.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that the law is enforced inconsistently across this country. It is the duty of the police to enforce the law as it stands. Although the statistics show that the majority of those arrested for the possession of cannabis receive a caution, cautioning rates vary from force to force, as he said. The Government agree that as much consistency as possible is desirable, but discretion is necessary to allow the police to take account of individual circumstances. To achieve greater consistency, the Association of Chief Police Officers last February issued guidelines to its members on case disposal options, including cautions, for drugs offenders. It is still too early to assess the impact of the guidance on that objective. The guidelines emphasise that one way in which the police service can demonstrate its fairness in its dealings with those it comes into contact with is by being as consistent as possible in case disposal, as I believe it is.

On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North about the context of drug use, the guidelines recognise that even an apparently straightforward case can involve a multitude of human, social and situational factors that can influence police judgment on the best way to proceed. It properly emphasises that the people best placed to make such judgments will be those who are most directly concerned and have first-hand access to all available information.

For example, under the final warning scheme, a first offence results in a reprimand, warning or charge, depending on the seriousness of the offence. A young offender cannot be given more than one reprimand: any further offending leads to a warning or a charge. No young person can receive more than two warnings. The final warning scheme has been piloted in five areas for 18 months since 30 September 1998, and it will be rolled out nationally from 1 June this year. Experience of the way in which the scheme works nationally will provide useful information if, in future, it is felt necessary to put adult cautioning on a statutory basis.

The hon. Member for Newport, West mentioned the courts. The balance must be drawn between achieving consistency and providing the courts with the discretion to carry out their job properly. The Court of Appeal issues sentencing guidelines where they appear to be necessary, and such guidelines have been in existence in respect of drugs since 1982. In addition, and as part of the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, a new statutory body, the Sentencing Advisory Panel, has been established to provide advice to the Court of Appeal on sentencing. Hon. Members may be interested to know that that panel is currently considering drawing up sentencing guidelines in respect of opium.

The Government are determined to break the drugs-crime cycle. Contrary to what the hon. Member for Newport, West said in his uncharacteristically offensive speech, we are not complacent, nor do we believe that the problems have been solved. There is a long way to go and we are committed to finding the right ways in which to proceed. The hon. Gentleman appears to believe that former Conservative Ministers in the Department have appeared complacent, but I doubt that they were complacent in the way that he suggests.

Our objective is to use each stage of the criminal justice system to identify drug-misusing offenders, to get them into treatment where appropriate and to monitor their progress through drugs testing. I pay tribute to the way in which the hon. Member for Newport, West paid a great deal of attention to drug rehabilitation. I concede that the Government must do much more work to ensure that proper facilities are made available. We acknowledge that there is a failing that needs to be remedied, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has highlighted it.

The link between drugs and crime is now clearly established by research. Our research programme to drug test arrestees shows that nearly 80 per cent. test positive for an illegal drug. The same research suggests that property crime provides about 75 per cent. of the total illegal income of arrestees, of which about one third is spent on buying heroin and/or crack cocaine.

[Mr. Clarke]

The Government want to create a healthy and confident society that is increasingly free of the harm caused by the misuse of drugs. A complex set of issues is associated with drugs misuse, which we are fully committed to tackling. We have set out a strategy and we believe that law enforcement agencies have a key role to play. I am glad that we have debated this matter today. It will continue to be actively debated by hon. Members in the House and by others.

Developing Country Debt

1.30 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the progress that has been made in writing off the debts of the world's poorest countries. The subject brought me into politics—I was concerned about national and global poverty and inequality.

For a long time, I have found it offensive that we generally enjoy such an affluent life style when there is so much unmet need in the world. I welcome the initiatives of groups such as Jubilee 2000, on whose briefing paper I shall draw heavily. A year or two ago, I helped to launch the parliamentary element of Jubilee 2000, and I spoke from a platform in this Chamber, although it then had a different layout.

I welcome the Government's efforts in this context. I am glad that they have reversed the long-standing fall in the percentage of national income that is spent on aid—the change is entirely laudable. I also welcome the lead that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has taken.

I want to discuss the disjunction between perception and reality, and to outline where we should go from here. I support much that has been done. My concern about the disjunction between perception and reality is that in the public's mind debt is virtually off the agenda in the United Kingdom. People have heard the announcement that we are writing off 100 per cent. of debt, and they might have heard President Clinton say a few months ago that the Americans will do the same. They might assume that the issue is largely solved, but the Economic Secretary well knows that that is not the case. Neither the public nor the Government should be complacent about debt.

We have rightly focused on debt during this millennium year, but that should not distract us from the broader problems. Someone said to me the other day that many of the world's poorest people live in countries that are not significantly indebted. We urgently need to tackle the debt issue, but when we have done so we should remember that that effort was part of a larger agenda.

I want to respond to criticisms of the progress that has been made. The phrase, "faster, deeper, broader" stems from the idea that debt relief should move faster, that there should be more of it and that it should be applied to more countries. I received an interesting letter from the Economic Secretary, which I imagine was prepared in response to Christian Aid's "one third, two thirds" postcard campaign. She used the phrase, "faster, wider, deeper", which suggests that she sympathises with the associated goals. I hope that she will expand on her comments.

Although we have heard announcements about the speed of change, the reality is a long way behind. I recognise that that is not wholly or even largely the fault of the UK Government. I urge the Economic Secretary to use her influence and that of the Government in international organisations to speed up the process. Last September, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer was wearing his hat as the chairman of the International Monetary Fund's monetary and financial committee, he said:

> If we are successful, it will be a matter not of years or months but weeks before the first country will benefit from debt relief.

That upbeat and optimistic statement was qualified by another statement in March 2000. The Secretary-General of the United Nations said:

> The deeper, faster and broader relief promised last year has yet to materialise.

There is a disjunction between people's perceptions and aspirations and reality.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a good reason for the delay is the need to give heavily indebted poor countries a chance to comment on the poverty reduction programme that is connected with debt write-off? I should be concerned if such conditionality were lost—debt relief should be fast-tracked.

Mr. Webb: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. The Secretary of State for International Development spoke of the dangers of searching for a perfect poverty-reduction scheme. We need a balance. We must ensure that debt that is written off and that service payments saved are spent on poverty reduction. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and I agree that we should not drag out that process.

Currently, only five countries appear to benefit from the enhanced HIPC initiative, which is even fewer than was thought likely at Christmas. I want to touch briefly on some reasons for the delays. The role of the International Monetary Fund is important. If Britain's influence is relatively powerful, I hope that pressure can be brought to bear on the IMF. Jubilee 2000 has suggested that the IMF's handling of the situation in Guyana has been neither consistent nor helpful, and I hope that Guyana will shortly receive assistance.

In the context of writing off debts, international organisations such as the World Bank are apparently worried about their triple-A credit ratings. That fear seems unnecessary, and I hope that pressure will be brought to bear in that regard. As the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) noted, there are delays associated with the preparation of poverty reduction strategy papers. One hopes that that process will not be too protracted.

The role of Japan, which is a major creditor nation, has been called into question, particularly in the context of Ghana, Malawi and Benin. In respect of Japan's role and the pressure that is being brought to bear, a rather different message is being given in private than in public. If the Japanese Government are trying to prevent countries from participating in the HIPC process, I hope that the Prime Minister will tell them that such behaviour is inappropriate when he travels to Japan later this year.

Mr. Colman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No. The hon. Gentleman did not make clear his intention to intervene, and I cannot give way twice.

Japan has expressed concern about the moral hazard associated with writing off debts, yet it supported its banks to the tune of billions. I hope that the Government will make it clear to the Japanese Government that that is unacceptable. The United States Congress seems unwilling to back President Clinton's aspirations with hard cash. The European Union seems to be saying, "If the Americans won't play ball, perhaps we won't do our bit." At the bottom of the pile are the people of the world's poorest countries, who have to wait while this virtual merry-go-round continues. I hope that the Minister agrees that those delays are unacceptable, and will reassure us that the Government will do all that they can to break the logjam.

Speed is important, but so is the extent of debt write-off. The perception exists that 100 per cent. of debt has been written off, but, as the Minister well knows, that is far from the case. Indeed, in respect of the five countries that have reached decision point, the average stock of debt has been cut by only 40 per cent. Debt service costs have been cut by only 35 per cent. The 100 per cent. write-offs to which reference has been made are, typically, bilateral, aid-related debt. As far as I am aware, there are at present no pledges for 100 per cent. write-offs from the IMF, the World Bank or regional development banks. Given that one third of HIPCs' long-term debt is multilateral, it is clear that we are a long way from the Jubilee 2000 goal of full write-off during this year.

To give a feel for the inadequacy of the current situation, I shall quote from the Jubilee 2000 coalition briefing. It states:

> After full implementation of the Cologne deal, its first five recipients will still be paying more than half a billion dollars every year to foreign creditors—almost as much as they spend on health care.

I shall give a flavour of what that means for those five countries. HIV, which leaves 1 million children orphaned, is a big problem in Uganda, and we are not doing enough for that country. In Bolivia, basic sanitation is a fundamental problem. In Mauritania, nearly two thirds of the adult population are illiterate. The problems in Mozambique have been well documented in recent months. In Tanzania, one third of children are malnourished. On average, those countries continue to pay out substantial sums, even though they are participating in the scheme, and the call for deeper action has been noted.

A slightly alarming development is the suggestion that Overseas Development Administration cancellations—aid write-offs—might be taken into account in considering HIPC initiatives. In other words, as in my field of social security, it will resemble a 100 per cent. taper: every pound that goes to one area is taken from another. Clearly, that was not what the United Kingdom Government intended when they said that they would write off bilateral debt. I hope that pressure will be put on the Paris Club creditors and the IMF to ensure that that does not happen and that there is genuine additionality.

We have discussed speed and depth. Which countries should be covered by debt write-off initiatives? Jubilee 2000 has cited some very needy and deserving countries that have a strong case but are not covered. I should like to refer to two of them. Nigeria has huge debts. Due to its political history, money that it has been given has sometimes ended up in the wrong pockets. One reason why Nigeria was not in the original HIPC initiative was that it had access to borrowing from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. I gather that under the agreement that Nigeria is reaching with

[Mr. Webb]

the IMF, it will not have access to any further borrowing from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and only $360 million will go towards poverty alleviation—10 times less than it is due to pay in debt service. That gives an idea of the scale of Nigeria's problem, and I hope that it can be brought into the HIPC scheme.

I should briefly mention Haiti, which has been described as one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere and is in urgent of debt cancellation. Again, it has a troubled political history.

These are not simple issues. The countries involved clearly have a responsibility to channel the money that is used from debt write-offs into poverty alleviation. However, I get the impression that creditor nations and international organisations are not seized of the urgency of the matter. Some of them—the UK Government may be exempt from this criticism—are continuing at far too pedestrian a pace, not appreciating that as every day goes by another child is missing out on schooling or another mother is missing out on primary health care. The matter is therefore terribly urgent.

I urge the Economic Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development to use all the influence that they can bring to bear on the multilateral organisations and creditor nations to follow the British lead and to ensure that Britain's promises are borne out by actions.

I often raise the concerns of South Gloucestershire, my local authority, in Adjournment debates, yet the matter that I have discussed today is as important to my constituents as their local traffic or schools. Many of them feel passionately about it. I hope that the Economic Secretary shares my, and their, concerns and will offer us some encouragement.

1.43 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): As a girl raised in South Gloucestershire, I am sad that the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) did not say anything further about it. However, he has raised a very important topic, and I shall endeavour to cover as quickly as I can the points that he made.

No one can doubt the Government's commitment to reducing the debts of the poorest countries. It is clear from the hon. Gentleman's remarks that he shares that view, and I am grateful for his recognition of the Government's achievements, especially the work of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Government called for, and secured, a review of the original heavily indebted poor countries initiative and pressured our G7 and international colleagues to adopt challenging standards on debt reduction and the number of countries that receive debt relief. We are committed to giving 100 per cent. debt relief to every country that qualifies under the HIPC initiative.

Many Members of Parliament, of all parties, recognise that our duties to the poorest countries are wider than debt relief for relief's sake. The Government start from a more fundamental principle—our dependence on each other and the fact that we are part of a wider community with mutual responsibilities and linked destinies. In today's global market, that interdependence is further accentuated and our fates and interests are bound together. We must look beyond our front doors and national boundaries, as the hon. Gentleman did, and accept that our responsibilities extend beyond traditional national boundaries.

If it is to be sustained, prosperity must be shared and the people of this country well understand that moral imperative. I have seen at first hand the British public's response to the call for debt relief in developing countries. I have seen the thousands of letters and postcards that have been written and I have responded to many of them.

Without doubt, last year's achievements and the agreement reached at Cologne to cancel $100 billion of developing countries' debt would not have been possible without the actions of ordinary citizens throughout the world. They forced their Governments to listen to the call for faster, wider and deeper debt relief. The challenge now is to implement the enhanced HIPC initiative.

The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of efforts to persuade our international partners to meet the agreed targets under the HIPC initiative and to go beyond the agreed level of debt relief by providing 100 per cent. relief on the commercial debts of HIPCs.

At the beginning of this week, the Japanese Government announced that Japan will provide up to 100 per cent. relief on HIPC debt. The United Kingdom welcomes that announcement and acknowledges that it as an important step along the road to faster, wider and deeper debt relief. We shall continue to remind Japan and others of the importance of delivering on those commitments.

Following the announcement by Germany at the EU-Africa summit earlier this month, the G7 is now acting as one to relieve the debts that have, for too long, burdened those countries. The United Kingdom acknowledges the fact that other countries, such as Norway and Sweden, have made similar commitments and urges other creditors to join us in making 2000 the year in which we make a commitment to debt forgiveness on a global scale.

The challenge of debt reduction goes wider than that. The new HIPC framework acknowledges that we need debt relief not just for its own sake, but to break the vicious circle of debt, poverty and economic decline and to create a virtuous circle of debt relief, poverty reduction and economic development. Debt reduction and aid alone are not enough. That could lead to millions of pounds flowing into prestige projects that do nothing to relieve poverty, or to corrupt regimes and military excesses that destroy rather than build for the future. Only if debt relief is combined with the economic and social policies that are essential for economic development can it be the catalyst that releases countries from poverty. The Government place great emphasis on the implementation of countries' poverty reduction strategies, to which the hon. Member for Northavon referred.

Poverty reduction strategies are vital to the new approach that recognises the links that form the virtuous circle. First, we must deliver enhanced debt relief. Secondly, we must build a link between debt relief and poverty reduction strategies. Thirdly, we must

create the new conditions for economic development that will allow all poor countries to participate in the global economy. Fourthly, we must recognise that education for all and the recognition of human capital is central to the whole project.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we are making fast enough progress. The United Kingdom's main messages at the spring meetings will be that the process is important because it integrates macro-economics and structural and social policies in a new and powerful tool that will help developing countries in their efforts to reduce poverty and promote growth. It is important to expand participation in national policy making and the general building of a civic society that promotes openness and transparency. If Governments have sound poverty reduction strategies and an effective budgetary and institutional framework in place, donor focus should increasingly shift from projects to programme assistance. A good poverty reduction strategy will be based on a country-specific analysis of the processes that lead to and maintain poverty and of the impact that particular policies and spending will have on that.

The United Kingdom argues that a country need not have a full poverty reduction strategy paper in place when a decision is made. That addresses the question about how perfect we must be to make progress. We want poverty reduction strategy papers to be in place by completion and we want countries to take as long as they need to achieve a good PRSP that has broad support. However, we want countries to make decisions quickly and we have argued only for countries' IMF programmes to be broadly on track with a plausible road map for producing a PRSP. We are trying to meet the points made by the hon. Member for Northavon about the pace and the way in which the matter should be handled.

The Government's approach to developing countries' debt involves more than just cancelling the debt. Our strategy is to achieve sustainable development. We must be able to work with international organisations, other Governments and non-governmental organisations to develop a momentum towards development. The world's richest nations must accept their obligations towards the world's poorest people, so that those people can be empowered to play their full role in the global system.

The hon. Member for Northavon asked what other pressure we might bring to bear. Last week, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development wrote to the acting managing director of the IMF and the chairman of the World Bank about slippage in the timetable and suggested that the fund and the bank set up a HIPC initiative implementation unit to oversee the HIPC timetable. As a result of their letter, the bank and the fund have now told their respective boards that they will set up a joint committee to manage the HIPC process. The United Kingdom welcomes that development and will propose that the fund and the bank go further and mirror those changes at staff level by setting up a joint committee of the boards to be responsible for managing the HIPC timetable.

The contribution of the United States will be crucial in funding debt relief for the early Latin American cases. There was a setback when Congress failed to deliver last October, but we are reassured by the noises coming from the US Administration that they remain committed to securing the money to meet their pledge.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Guyana, which is off track with its economic reform programme, but we are confident that it is working closely with the IMF to resolve the remaining obstacles.

We have led international efforts to support the Nigerian Government but, with its history, it needs to demonstrate a track record to make progress.

As we embark on another wave of technological revolution, we must be sure that we include the people and places that the world has forgotten for too long. I applaud the hon. Member for Northavon for raising this important subject. We have made great progress and I am confident that we shall continue to make further progress. We are at the forefront of the international community in leading the pressure for effective strategies without losing sight of the fact they must be pursued vigorously at all times to achieve poverty reduction for so many of the world's population.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eight minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 April 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Disabled People

[*Relevant documents: Ninth report from the Education and Employment Committee Session 1998-99 HC 111 and Second Special Report (Government Reply) Session 1999-2000 HC 214.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Allen.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I am absolutely delighted to speak in the debate. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), was my co-Chairman on the Education and Employment Committee when it decided to embark on the report. Little did we think that she would be replying to the debate on it.

I thank the Committee's staff, in particular its three advisers, Marilyn Howard, Nigel Meager and Jenny Morris, for their excellent work. We set ourselves the enormous and ambitious objective of exploring the barriers that disabled people face in entering education, employment and training. Our deliberations took a long time because the report seemed to grow as we warmed to our theme. It was a steep learning curve. We quickly realised that a complex tissue of issues had to be sorted out if we were to make useful recommendations. I also thank the Government for their constructive response. The Committee is proud of the report, which makes 59 constructive recommendations. We have been in the business of pushing the Government in the direction in which they wanted to travel.

I have a personal reason for regarding the report's theme as important. As a schoolboy in the 1950s, I thought that full employment was a great leap forward to a more civilised society. That was understandable. I came from the north-east. My father had been unemployed for seven years in the 1930s. Virtually every family in our region had been scarred by the experience of unemployment, which removes people's dignity, their ability to look after their family and their self-respect. It often leads to deep depression and, not infrequently, suicide. I decided that full employment was a proper objective for a Labour Government and, like many other people, was utterly dismayed when we returned to the days of mass unemployment. I remember Norman St. John Stevas, who is now in another place, saying that mass unemployment is a moral and social evil. That remains my view.

I am surprised, but delighted, that we are standing on the threshold of achieving fuller, if not full, employment within a decade. If the Government continue to run the economy along the present lines, if the world economy continues as at present and if the revolution in technology bears down on inflation as it does now—I realise that there are a lot of ifs—it will be possible to run the economy with a rate of unemployment far lower than it has been during the past 20 years. That is important for disabled people, because 1 million or more sick and disabled people want to work. If we are ever to approach full employment, the Government must be ambitious.

My hon. Friend the Minister will know that the Employment Institute audit estimates that we are about 10 percentage points below a decent definition of full employment, and that 2 million, 3 million or even 4 million people who want to work do not have jobs. I would not want a low definition to be accepted, but I believe that full employability is a non-starter. It may be a necessary condition, but it is not what I would call full employment. I applaud the active labour market policies followed by my right hon. and hon. Friends—they are the best that I have seen in 30 years of politics—and many of their job generation policies are good, but both policies must work together.

I contend that about 3 million jobs must be created if we are to get back into work all those people who want jobs. That is important for the 1 million or so disabled people. It is important also for the north-east, because many males in their 50s who lost their jobs in shipbuilding, rail engineering, mining and the iron and steel works have not worked since. A great deal of hidden unemployment exists in the north-east, which is why its gross domestic product per head is so low compared with that in many other regions. As a result, although the employment rate is 79 per cent. in the south-east, in the north-east it is only 69 per cent.

It is important to appreciate such concepts. With unemployment at a 20-year low, and with 1 million vacancies—according to the Government's reckoning, multiplying the vacancies registered with the Employment Service by three—and with 1.1 million-plus people on the claimant count record, certain quarters may be tempted to bring those figures together. They may say that, if we have 1 million vacancies and just over 1 million people on the claimant count, we must therefore have full employment. They would then say that the only thing that remains to be done is for the unemployed people to fill the vacancies that the Government have created. That is far too simplistic a way of approaching the problem; it is simplistic almost to the point of being misleading.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I do not wish to dissent from the right hon. Gentleman's line of argument, but does he agree that, as the labour market tightens, with particular reference to regions other than the north-east, it is even more important to ensure that those disabled people who want to work are able to do so, not only to satisfy their own aspirations but to relieve the overall pressure on the economy?

Mr. Foster: That is exactly the point that I had hoped to make later. Indeed, there is an anomaly, or an irony, in our approach to the matter. In one sense, the Government would be better employed trying to bring back into an overheated labour market all the single parents, disabled people and those aged over 55, because that would bear down on inflation in the areas that are overheating, which would relieve pressure on areas such as mine, which are suffering from the one-club economic policy. I do not want to tell the Government to forget disabled people, single parents and other disadvantaged

[Mr. Foster]

groups elsewhere—far from it—but there is great economic gain to be had by drawing back into the labour market many disabled people and single parents in parts of the country that are overheating.

The issue is important, not only because it bears strongly on the Government's ability to achieve the objective of full employment but because it is central to any reform of the welfare state. In Beveridge's day, the welfare state was designed on the assumption that there would be full employment. That was a courageous assumption in 1944, but it proved to be true for the next 30 years. The welfare state that Beveridge hoped to achieve could not have been paid for if there had been mass unemployment. If we are to achieve any worthwhile reform of the welfare state, getting people off benefit and into work is essential. If we do not do that, we will not be able to pay for the services that we aim to provide for disabled and poor people, wherever they may be.

The report is central to the Government's strategy for achieving full employment, reforming the welfare state and achieving a just society. We cannot have such a society unless most people in it share in our increasing prosperity. Disabled people deserve to share much more in the increasing wealth of the nation. That is necessary for an economically efficient community and a more just society.

Paragraph 12 of the report brings into sharp relief the problem that the Government and the Select Committee have tried to investigate. It states:

—Only half of disabled people of working age are economically active, compared with 85%of non-disabled people;

—those disabled people who are economically active are twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people, and more likely to be long-term unemployed;

—the employment rate of disabled people is little over half that of non-disabled people;

—over a million economically inactive disabled people would like to work; and

—disabled people are much less likely to have educational qualifications than non-disabled people and, as a result, when in work are more likely to be employed in low-skilled occupations.

Those employed in low-skilled occupations are, to use a more graphic term, locked in the low-pay sector of the economy. They are likely to be moving in and out of work, and taking a job will often not be worth their while because of fear and uncertainty about whether they will lose it and whether their benefits will be restored.

If that is the problem, what barriers stop disabled people entering work and education? There is clearly discrimination among employers, although it is often unintentional. Very often, employers have not had to think the problem through. Paragraph 15 of the report states:

It is clear that discrimination on the part of employers contributes to the disadvantage experienced by disabled people in the labour market. One of the key measures of success proposed in the Welfare Reform Green Paper was a reduction in discrimination against disabled people. We believe that there is still a long way to go before this target is met, particularly in the field of employment.

Paragraph 22 concerns the recommendations for the Employment Service, which has been undergoing a culture change. I am highly encouraged by developments. The service used to be the policeman of a harsh benefits regime and has become a sharing caring organisation trying to encourage people into work, education and training. That is wholly welcome. The Committee believes that the service could do much more to work with employers who do not usually take on disabled people. We recommend that it improves its marketing among such employers.

If we are to get employers to take on more disabled people, it will be the business case that will persuade them. Employers are not charities and they will not throw crumbs to disabled people to salve the conscience of the managing director. They are there to make profits and to serve their customers. There is a strong business case for employing disabled people. In paragraph 23, the Committee set out the evidence from the Employers Forum on Disability, the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation and the Confederation of British Industry.

We were delighted to hear from employers that, compared with many able-bodied people, disabled people were more productive and reliable, that their time keeping was better and that their absenteeism was lower. Their productivity is high because they are so delighted to be given the opportunity to work that they throw themselves 100 per cent. into ensuring that they are successful and that they retain the job.

We want employers and the Government to put to the fore the business case for employing disabled people. That is what will ultimately be effective. We must change the culture and that will happen through businesses talking to other businesses. That is especially true in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, which could be excused for being worried about taking on disabled people.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was an important step forward; the Disability Rights Commission, which we welcome completely, will give teeth to the Act. We would like the employers' threshold to be reduced progressively to two from the present level of 15. That aim might not get the assent of the whole House. The recommendation was made strongly by many employers and the Employers Forum on Disability.

There are difficulties and we are not suggesting that the Government should be bureaucratic and harsh on the matter. We want the threshold reduced because it cannot be justified in principle. The Government want to go in that direction, but many small employers are overwhelmed by much of the legislation coming forward. They do not have human resources directors to read all the legislation and to sort out and implement the codes of conduct sensitively. We want to be understanding of the small business sector, but we urge the Government not to be too understanding. We must make progress and the best way forward is to take the small business community with us. I hope that the spirit, at least, of the recommendation, if not the objective, will receive Tory support.

I do not want to speak too much about educational aspects, because I know that colleagues will want to do so in detail. I shall touch on one—the physical barriers to access to, in particular, further education. I expected

that to be dealt with by now, but we received much evidence that there is still a long way to go. We recommend at paragraph 77

that the Government ensure that sufficient funds are available for those institutions of further and higher education

that need to do so to improve physical access to their premises by 2004. I hope that the Government will take that on board and try to encourage progress.

A useful recommendation, which the Government seem, from their response, to have either ignored or misunderstood, appears in paragraph 80. We recommend that

the Government consider establishing regional resource centres to co-ordinate the provision of scarce or expensive equipment for disabled students.

I do not think that the Government really understood that. It would be fairly easy to achieve. Perhaps the colleges of further education and the institutes of higher education could do it themselves, with a bit of encouragement from Government. Those scarce resources could be far more efficiently used if they were available on a regional basis.

In almost every investigation that the Committee has carried out, we have found that transport is a problem. That applies to the new deal for single parents, the new deals for the 18 to 24, over 24 or over 55 age groups, and the new deal for disabled people—it even applies to just getting people into jobs. Either there is little public transport or it is in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is surprising that, while jobs have migrated from city centres to the suburbs or other cities, the transport authorities have not kept pace with the location of jobs. Perhaps that is because they assume that everyone has a car in which to go to work. That is by no means true. If we are to improve mobility for the whole spectrum of unemployed people, we must urgently consider public transport.

I know that the Government are beginning to deal with the problem that I have described, but I am not convinced that the amount given to transport in the Budget will achieve what is necessary to support our objective of full employment. Those transport changes are essential for most people, but particularly for disabled people, to enable them to travel to take up opportunities, and to afford to do so.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The Government should be encouraged to go beyond the idea of a discount card and to consider perhaps the idea of a taxi card, as taxis can be used by people with a range of disabilities. The Government have not focused on such matters quite as Parliament would want.

Mr. Foster: I could not agree more. We mentioned that issue in the report, if I remember correctly. Unfortunately, I must skip over much in the report. I should like to discuss access to work and the need for greater publicity about that.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): As my right hon. Friend is skipping over that point, perhaps I may make one observation. Clearly, looking at the table on page 7, the most vulnerable people are those who suffer from mental illness. From my experience—I am sure that it is also the experience of other Members of Parliament—I know that people who suffer from mental illness find it difficult to get back into employment. I wonder whether a case can be made for properly funding intermediary organisations that work in that area. All the bodies in Stroud with which I work are for ever looking for funding, yet the people with whom they work genuinely need a long-term strategy to help them get back into work. I wonder whether that point could be taken up in some way.

Mr. Foster: That is a very interesting suggestion from my hon. Friend, which the Minister will have heard and, no doubt, will respond to.

Two thirds of disabled people of working age become disabled at work. It is all too easy for employers to find a quick excuse to get rid of them and we should pay great attention to considering how we can encourage people who suddenly become ill to continue in employment, because that is to everyone's benefit.

Some of the proposals that have been made for reforming the welfare state are controversial, but the sound of music coming from the Government really worried many disabled people who thought that there was a possibility that they would lose benefits. The fact that so much unnecessary worry was caused was no help to the Government. They may say that that unnecessary worry was caused by their opponents or by over-vociferous disability groups, but I believe that that genuine concern worked against the Government's objective, for which they should bear some responsibility—if I can say that as kindly as possible to my hon. Friend the Minister. We had evidence that disabled people felt threatened and undermined by the reform of the welfare benefits system. The benefit integrity project continued for a while, which we understand, but several people lost benefits under this Government, which did not help to encourage and support the positive moves that were made.

I hope that we have moved beyond that now. Certainly, when my hon. Friend the Minister and her colleagues from the Department of Social Security appeared before the Committee, no language of compulsion or intimidation was used. We probed the issues carefully, but could not fault the attitudes of Ministers and officials. I shall not explore why there was different mood music at one time, but I compliment the Ministers because they understand the problem and are dealing with it very sensitively. The fear of losing benefits is one of the great barriers to work for disabled people, especially if they receive substantial benefits for carers or personal assistants. We must applaud people who, in such difficult circumstances, decide that they want to work. We cannot encourage people enough, and it cannot be the Government's intention that such people should then fall into a personal assistance or other benefit trap.

I end on this note. I hope that, with the proposal to merge the Employment Service with the Benefits Agency, with a personal adviser at the centre of the new system, we will develop a learning organisation that can inform proper and sensitive reform of the welfare state. Policy advisers sitting in their ivory towers, whether they are academics or not, cannot foresee the law of unintended consequences. Almost invariably the Government's good intentions for benefits turn out to

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be harsh or cruel to one group of people. This learning organisation, which will be called ONE, may or may not produce savings, but it will certainly enable us, in the most sensitive way possible, to get more people off benefit and into work, which is what disabled people and the Government want.

3 pm

Mr. **David Tredinnick** (Bosworth): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate and the opportunity that we have had in this Parliament to debate Select Committee reports on Thursday afternoons. It has been an excellent initiative.

I listened with great care and interest to the remarks of the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), with his 30 years' experience, and I noted that the Minister was closely involved in the report. That will no doubt make it easier for her to answer the questions that are put to her this afternoon, because Ministers are not always noted for fully answering questions.

I hope to give the Chamber some insights into the situation in my constituency and to relate my remarks to the problems faced by disabled people, as set out by the right hon. Gentleman and outlined in paragraph 12 of this excellent report. The case must be set against a background of neglect by the Government, who promised so much.

Mr. Roger Berry (Kingswood): Is the hon. Gentleman being serious?

Mr. Tredinnick: The hon. Gentleman is entitled to intervene and I have given way, but he has not heard what I want to say. I was about to say that, in many respects, disabled people have had a raw deal under Labour, because under the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 the Government means-tested incapacity benefit—

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Did disabled people have a raw deal under the previous Government?

Mr. Tredinnick: I am not saying that the previous Government got everything right, but this Government have got quite a lot wrong. On 26 March 1998, the then Minister for Welfare Reform, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), said:

> Our commitment to the vulnerable is not negotiable.—[*Official Report*, 26 March 1998; Vol. 309, c. 686.]

Thanks to new Labour, and notwithstanding that commitment, income from occupational and personal pensions will now be taken into account in assessments for invalidity benefit. Once again, those who have attempted to save for their retirement, some of whom are disabled, will be penalised. In May last year, on Report and Third Reading of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill, 67 Government Members rebelled on this issue. I wonder whether any of the rebels are here this afternoon. It is interesting that the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) was a rebel. A further 38 Government Members abstained.

The Government have also had the embarrassment of seeing 12 charities, including Scope, RADAR, the Royal National Institute for the Blind, the Disability Alliance and the Carers National Association, resign from their Disability Benefits Consortium as a result of their changes to incapacity benefit. The hon. Members for Kingswood and for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) intervened in my speech as though there was nothing wrong with the Government's policy. If the Government have got the policy right, why have so many disillusioned organisations resigned? Surely that is telling evidence that the Government have not got the policy right. The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady would do well to pay attention to these pressing issues, which present difficulties for those with disabilities. As Ian Bruce, a representative of the RNIB, said:

> There comes a point when if your involvement is being interpreted as support for something you do not support, and on top of that you are having no impact, then there is only one thing to do—

resign, which is what the RNIB did.

We must also remember that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was a Conservative measure, and is the rock on which current reform is based. [*Interruption.*] This is not a laughing matter—we should bear in mind the fact that it was a Conservative measure that replaced earlier legislation which proved unsatisfactory.

The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland has set the scene this afternoon, and I shall refer to some of the difficulties experienced by disabled people in my constituency. A constituent to whom I shall refer as Mr. Jones was involved in a terrible car accident in April 1997. I shall detail the chronology of subsequent events because they illustrate the problems that the Government and disabled people face as they address these issues. After the accident, Mr. Jones was paralysed. His home had to be adapted accordingly, and he spent two years organising matters. However, because of poor assessment, bathroom adaptations that were provided through a grant proved totally unsuitable for his needs, and failed to provide independence. In the light of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland about employment, I should point out that Mr. Jones's difficulty in adapting his home prevented an early return to employment. In his case, suitable adaptations probably would not have been made—further adaptations are about to be made—had it not been for the intervention of authorities such as the county borough council and, perhaps, me.

Mr. Jones faced the further difficulty—the Minister should note this—of getting a lift installed in his house. It took 10 months, during which time he had to sleep downstairs, use a commode and strip-wash rather than shower. Why could not the paperwork for the adaptations have been started during the six months that Mr. Jones spent in hospital, so that the go-ahead for a grant could be given as soon as he was discharged? Mr. Jones's wife was consulted two weeks before he was discharged, and it took from October 1997 to June 1998 for the grant to be approved. This is a very real problem. Disabled people are not told how to apply for such grants. The issue is addressed in the report, and the Minister should take note of it.

The use of wheelchairs appears to present a major difficulty, and that issue has affected Mr. Jones. He uses the same wheelchair—a roller wheelchair—with which he was issued by the hospital. Roller wheelchairs are heavy, uncomfortable and difficult to manoeuvre. He has been on the Leicestershire wheelchair service voucher scheme waiting list for two years, and has yet to be told when he can expect delivery of a lightweight manual chair. He was not told about the voucher scheme, which enables people to order wheelchairs suitable for their size and needs, but heard about it from a representative who was selling wheelchairs.

As far as Mr. Jones'employment prospects were concerned, despite being hampered by the failure to make adaptations to his home, he was offered a part-time job by his former employer. This morning, he said to me—or rather to my assistant; I was not able to speak to him directly—that the risk of losing his benefit entitlement for several weeks was too great, and that another disincentive was that the income from part-time employment often has a punitive effect on benefits and help. He saw that as the key issue, and said, in answer to the questions that I posed indirectly, that it would be a great help to the disabled if they were able to take work on trial for three or six months before they were prevented from getting back to their previous level of benefit.

The Minister may say that that is totally impractical, but—as hon. Members will know—many people come to us and say that it is the fear of losing benefits that prevents them from going back to work. Even if they have to leave work due to disability, they are automatically assumed to be capable of work and automatically lose entitlement to incapacity benefit. If they get an opportunity to have a go at employment, they have everything to lose if it does not work out. I agree that it would be helpful to have a regional officer to advise on disability issues. There should at least be an officer at county level—that would be welcome in Leicestershire—or even borough level.

Another issue that requires careful consideration is the giving out of incorrect information. For example, in respect of recreation facilities, public parks have been identified as being friendly for wheelchairs, when they are not. An easy way of making life more palatable for disabled people would be to provide better information services. I see the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland nodding; I am grateful for his support. Mr. Jones, my constituent, said that he receives a monthly magazine from the Spinal Injuries Association, but receives no other information or communication from any other organisation or agency. He did not know of the Department of Health publication "A practical guide for disabled people: where to find information, services and equipment", which was published last July, or of the Department for Education and Employment leaflet promoting disabled people's rights. No useful disability information was automatically sent to him as a result of being a claimant, and he therefore did not know about the wheelchair voucher scheme.

A mailing list of disabled people should be maintained, so that they automatically receive information. The Minister may say, "Why didn't he find out about it?" The answer is that he underwent a severe accident, and the people around him did not know where to look. Providing information would be an easy goal for the Government. They should carefully consider how to get accurate and timely information to those who need help.

The Audit Commission report, "Fully Equipped", reflects some of the recommendations in the Committee's report and the Government's response. I was therefore surprised and disappointed to hear on the "Today" programme that a woman who had suffered four amputations had been unable to use national health service artificial limbs because they were so uncomfortable. She had to go elsewhere, and fortunately received financial help through private sources. Her comment that she just wanted to get back to university demonstrated her positive outlook on life, and it is regrettable that she did not get any help.

That is a high-profile case, and when I discussed matters in detail with organisations responsible for helping the disabled in my constituency, I was told of the desperate need for a better limb and limb fitting service. A man in my constituency with whom I have worked closely, who does not have the use of his legs, told me that the NHS provides a grim selection of crutches. An allowance of £250 is made for manual wheelchairs, powered wheelchairs and scooters. A basic, cheap manual wheelchair costs £250, but powered models can cost more than £2,000. Scooters can cost from £2,500. He told me that adults often have to rely on charity for the provision of these items, although it is easier for children to get them.

Artificial limbs, prosthetics and orthotics—the science and practice of fitting surgical appliances to weak joints—is a weak area that the Government must address. I understand that one of the arguments in relation to artificial limbs is that we need experts to fit them, but I am reliably informed by medical students in my constituency that making prostheses is not complex. The Minister may want to consider whether a cartel is operating to restrict the provision of equipment.

In my constituency, there are organisations that have helped disabled people a great deal. The Council for Voluntary Services in Hinckley has done much. It tells me that it has long waiting lists for aids and equipment in the home, and that if one wants items quickly one must be prepared to push. The sick and disabled are in a bad position to do that. It has asked me to argue the case for more information and more communication. It also drew attention to the fact that the voluntary sector infrastructure is now dependent on short-term funding from the National Lottery Charities Board, and that local authority funding at county level does not increase with demand. There is a dire shortage of money for projects, and that is getting worse.

Hinckley Shopmobility initiative, which provides chair-bound people with the opportunity to go out shopping, depends on private sponsorship. Despite having two manual chairs, three powered chairs and two scooters, it is inundated with requests and cannot meet the demand. Its manager told me:

> It has to be remembered that many of the severely disabled really cannot work. However, employers still view those disabled people who are seeking employment as a complication.

That brings me to employment. The issue of discrimination in the workplace is a difficult one. However, having been around some of the smaller companies in my constituency, I must caution that it

[Mr. Tredinnick]

may not be feasible to make companies employing three, four or five people comply fully with disability legislation. That could lead to disabled people having to struggle in totally unsuitable buildings.

The primary care group in Hinckley has confirmed that there is a problem of under-recognition of disabled people. This morning, I was told by a county councillor, Roger Miller, that in Hinckley and Bosworth 190 people have learning disabilities—that figure is taken from the university of Leicester register—two thirds of whom have severe or moderate psychiatric problems. That is clear evidence that the issue of psychiatric care should be carefully addressed by the Government. The primary care group does not have the resources to extend its care provision in that direction; that is an issue of underfunding. The lack of respite for carers is another problem, not least because many carers in the community are elderly people, who get more exhausted than younger people. The Minister should consider whether anything can be done to ease the difficulties experienced by carers.

I welcome the fact that the first seminar of the Employers Forum on Disability to be held in Leicestershire is taking place today at Leicester City football club. That national body advises employers on all aspects of the employment of disabled people and draws to their attention a pool of people keen to find work. Leicestershire constabulary is a member, as is Leicestershire county council, which runs a supported employment scheme for the disabled. I wish them success with their initiatives to offer opportunities to the disabled. I hope that what I have said will assist the Government in responding to the debate.

3.19 pm

Mr. Roger Berry (Kingswood): I welcome the report. I was excited to read the report when it was first published, and am equally excited today to consider its recommendations further. I would say the same about the Government's response, with one or two small caveats, one of which I will come to in a moment.

The Committee's far-reaching report, covering a range of complex issues relating to employment and education opportunities for disabled people, was published last November. The following month, we received the report of the disability rights task force. My texts, in respect of current disability issues and problems and how we might address them, are the Committee's report, the report of the disability rights task force and the Government's responses to both documents. It has been observed that my hon. Friend the Minister's name is on two documents. She was a member of the Committee when it started its very long deliberations and she chaired the disability rights task force. She deserves our warmest congratulations and thanks for her work.

I am impressed by what the Government have done in the short time since the general election. I did not intend to look backwards—it would be a waste of time, and planning for the future is more exciting—but I shall explain briefly why I asked the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) whether he was serious. I know of no disability organisation that has any doubt about the difference between policy now and policy before the general election. Of course, all Governments make mistakes. Of course, there are one or two things that the current Government have done that I have not been happy about. However, since the election, there has been a sea change in public policy towards disabled people. To fail to recognise that is to fail to recognise the glaring reality. Just six years ago, the then Government said, "You cannot legislate to ensure equal rights for disabled people." They did nothing. The Disability Discrimination Bill was introduced not because that Government supported civil rights, but because the public outcry when they blocked civil rights was so great that they were forced to draft the Bill on the hoof. We know that it was drafted on the hoof because, when it came back from the House of Lords, there were more pages of amendments than there were pages in the original Bill.

After we had the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, we were told, "You can't have a commission to enforce it." By the time of the election, therefore, we had the DDA, but no commission. Just a few short days from today, the Disability Rights Commission will open its doors, marking a significant step forward with regard to the rights of disabled people. I have often said that we do not appreciate how important that commission could be—it will be path-breaking. The commission and other measures, such as the new deal for disabled people and the consultation document on special educational needs and disability rights in education, have been taken only because of the outcome of the general election. I warmly welcome the measures that the Government are taking.

I will now say something that may be slightly less popular—not too unpopular, I hope—with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster). I was delighted that the Committee went to Bristol. I say that as a proud resident of the city: part of my constituency is in Bristol. I know the organisations referred to in the report—the West of England centre for integrated living and the West of England coalition of disabled people. I have great respect and admiration for the work of those organisations, not least for the personal reason that they have taught me a great deal about disability issues. Over the years that I have been involved in political activity in the city of Bristol, those two organisations have opened my eyes to a range of disability issues of which I had not been aware. More important, they are not only run but staffed by disabled people. Indeed, the West of England centre for integrated living was one of the first 10 organisations to run a new deal for disabled people pilot project and was the only one that was run and staffed entirely by disabled people. It is an excellent organisation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland made a point in his perceptive opening comments that comes out clearly in the report. We need to be aware of the magnitude of the task that faces us. Only 50 per cent. of disabled people of working age are economically active, but for non-disabled people the percentage is 85 per cent. That is a vast difference. Disabled people who are economically active and are in work or seeking work are twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people. That is significant. Disabled people, for obvious reasons, are often less well qualified and more likely to be in low-paid jobs, so they

are more likely to be on very low incomes. The report makes it clear that tackling those problems requires further effort to enforce comprehensive legislation against discrimination and improve employment opportunities, and further effort in relation to the benefit system.

Discussion of the benefit system occupies several pages in the report. I was delighted to see that and, in particular, how the system addresses the basic question of how to deal with the extra cost of disability. People with impairment often face extra costs by virtue of having that impairment, which may include the cost of getting out of bed in the morning, of staying alive during the night, of going to work and of travelling for family and personal reasons. How should society deal with those extra costs of disability?

I shall start with the independent living funds, the purpose of which is to enable severely disabled people to live independently by assisting them with the cost of personal and domiciliary care to help them to get up in the morning, to go to work and to live like other human beings. However, as the report states, grants from the independent living funds are means-tested. Paragraph 173 states:

> Independent living fund payments to enable people to pay for their own assistance are reduced once people begin to earn over the amount of earnings disregard (£30 per week), so personal assistance users earning £20,000 per annum can find their income reduced to Income Support level—

that is, the income support level plus £30 disregard.

That was the position under the old rules and for every pound above the income support level plus £30, ILF payments were reduced pound for pound. The Government introduced new rules on 27 January. They could have been changed earlier, but were not. Under the rule change, disabled people can keep the £30 disregard above income support level. They can have 45 per cent. of earnings between £30 and £200 above the income support level. The ILF is then lost pound for pound.

There is no doubt that the Government's announcement makes the means test slightly less harsh. However, I find it difficult to understand the way in which society could honestly believe that severely disabled people in work and receiving an ILF grant, and who face costs in staying alive and in getting to work and back home, should pay half or three quarters of their income to cover their care costs. Means testing combined with taxation means that, for some, the rate of taxation that they pay is, in effect, between 60 per cent. and, at the top level, 100 per cent.

The situation is manifestly unfair—I do not know anyone who thinks that it is anything other than unfair. Not only is it unfair, but it is a means test with perverse incentives in relation to work. The West of England centre for independent living, the extremely laudable organisation to which I referred earlier, is recorded in the Committee's report as saying in relation to the top two barriers to employment for disabled people:

> The charging policies of social services departments and the Independent Living Fund mean that the earnings of disabled people using personal assistants and working are deducted down to Income Support levels, plus a £30 disregard.

There is indeed now a £30 disregard and then the 65 per cent. rate and the 100 per cent. tax rate. The situation is better than it was, but it is still unfair and, more important for present purposes, still a disincentive to work.

I therefore warmly welcome the Committee's recommendation that the Government should establish a cross-departmental working party, to include external organisations and experts. It would examine a range of options within the tax and benefit system that might ease the personal assistance trap, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland referred.

I am sorry that the Government's response to the recommendation has been disappointing. I will not take up time by reading it—it does not address the issue and does not even mention the ILF. In passing, I will say that the all-party disablement group has met Ministers from the Department of Social Security. We have expressed our strong support for the report's recommendation and hope that the Department will respond.

I hope that the Government, in responding, will bear in mind the recommendation from the royal commission on long-term care. Interestingly, the Government asked the commission to consider not only long-term care for older people but the situation for younger disabled people of working age who struggle to get to work and find that they must pay for a substantial part of their personal care. Paragraph 9.15 of the commission report says:

> We have also received evidence that means tested charges for personal care are one factor in providing disincentives to work or seeking better paid work. This point is also made in research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

I concur with that point. The report continues:

> Effectively these charges add to the financial burden of disabled people when they enter work or receive a wage increase.

We all look forward to the Government's response to the royal commission. I look forward in particular to what they say on that matter. We all know that means tests create difficulties and provide disincentives to work, save and be honest.

The Committee's report does not deal directly with fairness; it addresses disincentives to work. I entirely endorse what it says. We must address the basic issue of why disabled people should have to meet the substantial costs arising from their impairment. Why is personal care means-tested when we would not dream of means-testing health care or education?

The royal commission said:

> If the need for long-term care is a random event for older people, it is an even more random event for younger people given the lower incidence of disability in younger age groups and the arguments for collectively organised protection are as strong if not stronger.

I might not choose to use the phrase "collectively organised protection", although it is quite good. Why should we not apply similar principles to long-term care for younger people as we apply to long-term care for older people?

Finally, the royal commission commented on the cost of ending means testing in relation to the independent living fund. It said:

> We note that the ILF takes account of an applicant's means in determining its contribution to the costs of the care package which may include an element towards the costs of personal care. If it

[Mr. Roger Berry]

were no longer to have regard to an applicant's means for this element of its care packages, the Fund would require an additional £9 million this year to meet demands on it.

The source of the estimate that it would cost only £9 million to get rid of the wretched means test is, I see from the footnote, the ILF. Given that the ILF has not taken into account the obvious fact that those who work have higher incomes and pay more tax than they would if they did not work, the sum is truly trivial. There is no economic argument for means-testing ILF recipients. The economic case to scrap the means test is overwhelming.

I urge the Government to reconsider charging disabled people for the costs of their impairment. Disabled people have the threefold problem of impairment, the discrimination that arises from impairment and the costs of impairment. It cannot be right that they should have to pay those costs.

I accept that the Government are doing an enormous amount to address the issues, but some need to be satisfactorily resolved. Means-testing by the ILF and charges for local authority services for disabled people need to be dealt with quickly. If we are to move from exclusion to inclusion, remove discrimination and have meaningful equal opportunities, we need to address the problems.

3.38 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I am grateful for the chance to listen to the contributions. I hope that the debate will encourage many organisations, their staff and the individuals on whose behalf they work. I pay tribute to the public servants in Government and Government agencies who have helped Ministers and Parliament over the decades to realise how to create a better approach towards a state of well-being. I define the purposes of politics as the reduction of avoidable disadvantage, distress and handicap, and an improvement of well-being, which is a mixture of wealth and welfare.

I first got involved in this subject in 1985 when I was responsible for equal opportunities at the Department of Employment. I admired much of what had been done, but it was clear that more needed to be done. An advantage of having employment and education together in the Department for Education and Employment is that it is possible to see a continuity of people's lives. That was desired before, but it is more likely now. I do not argue that employment and education should stay together for ever, but one advantage is that, as a person approaches an employable age and ability, the existence of one transport system for education and one for employment begins to appear rather artificial. Perhaps we should begin to see the matter from the point of view of the individual and those around him, including family, friends and carers, either unpaid or with statutory responsibility. Continuity matters.

I pay tribute to the Select Committee on Education and Employment and to the Government's response, which I regard as an interim one. The Committee has attempted to obtain a moving picture, while, in responding, the Government need to take a still photograph; but we know that, if they were to respond after a year or two, more would have become possible.

I pay tribute also to constituents. Just outside my constituency is Angmering school, which provides admirable integrated education. The difficulty in making a contribution in a debate such as this is that the spectrum of conditions with which people must deal is so wide that, although generalisations are of no use, non-generalised comments are not relevant to all.

I have been very impressed by the mobility unit—previously officially called the immobility unit, but the present name is better—which tries to make transport available to people, whether as general or individual provision. It has made dramatic progress. Even so, I am aware that in some towns where there is a trend, to which I alluded in my intervention on the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), towards making taxis—not all minicabs—accessible, some people oppose it on the ground of greater expense. They do not see it as democratically available transport, in that most people would be able to book or hail the same machine, as has been achieved in London. This year is the first in which every taxi in London has been accessible to people in wheelchairs. That took a long time, but was worth while, not just for mobility but for access to education and work.

Fifteen years ago when I was at the Department of Employment, specialist services existed. Many employers, including a fair number in the public sector, were willing to provide useful and valuable employment to people for whom some initial investment was needed. One cannot expect otherwise if someone has a condition—I prefer the term "condition" to "handicap"—which makes it difficult to share in life's ordinary activities. Investing in success is always better than paying for inabilities or for what many would regard as failure.

I hope that figures will be published regularly, showing the proportion of people with various conditions who are in employment or education. However, I fear that we do not always search behind the figures. A table in the Select Committee report shows that between 27 and 67 per cent. of people with various conditions are unable to participate. For mental illness the figure is 17 per cent. Yet we are supposed to believe that mental illness makes up only 8 per cent. of what one might call disabling conditions. I do not believe that. I think that the figures for many people with mental illnesses are concealed behind other figures. Until people can speak as openly about a mental condition as they can about a physical one, those figures will continue to be hidden and we shall be unable to organise activities that will be more successful for those people.

My final point in what I hope is a brief contribution is that we need to allow people what many of us have enjoyed—a confidence in being able to attempt something, do it reasonably and improve. Most important is continuity of hope. A woman called Mia Kellmer Pringle was talking to me about young people. She told me to worry not about those who fail but about those who have never experienced success. That applies in the present context. In saying that, I pay tribute to the Committee, the Government and their advisers for what they have done so far.

3.44 pm

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): I am pleased to take part in this debate and I was honoured to be a member of the Select Committee. As a Bristol member, I want to

pay tribute to the West of England centre for integrated living. Perhaps unusually, I should like in that context to draw hon. Members'attention to the report's annexe, which gives far more detail than I have time to cover about the visit made to Bristol by members of the Select Committee. The visit gave us the opportunity to meet inspirational people within WECIL. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) has paid tribute to them, and I am sure that they would pay similar tribute to him for the manner in which he has campaigned in Bristol and in the House for the rights of people with disabilities. I am pleased to participate in a debate to which my hon. Friend has contributed with far more experience and detail than I have at my fingertips.

I congratulate the Government on an action that was taken only at the end of last month. In his Budget speech, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced the extension of the new deal for people with disabilities. The extension is based largely on the pilot schemes, including one in Bristol that we saw at the same time as our visit to WECIL. I should like to draw together two aspects of that visit that relate to the new deal and to the pilot work done in Bristol.

WECIL operated the positive action partnership scheme, or PAPS. I should emphasise that all the people involved had a disability. There was no one in the organisation or the support mechanism who did not have one. In supporting the new deal, the organisation makes a statement about PAPS:

> The Scheme is designed to help employers overcome the barriers which stop many disabled people securing good quality employment and which prevent them benefiting from the skills and qualifications which disabled people have to offer.

It is significant that that statement is the first part of WECIL's description of PAPS. It means, in other words, that disabled people want to ensure that their worth is recognised and that the barriers that discourage employers from employing them are overcome. Who better than WECIL to offer that advice and to ensure that people with disabilities can not only gain employment but retain it? I only wish that the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) could have been with us to experience the positive way forward that we have learned to expect from WECIL.

The director of WECIL goes on to state:

> PAPS offers support for both parties during the first twelve months of employment and provides training and consultancy for employers.

This is the crucial phrase:

> The aim is to help disabled people pursue careers.

The scheme is not just about getting people jobs or getting them back into employment. It is about ensuring that people with a disability can pursue a career and about providing support for them during their first 12 months. We have heard about the benefits problems facing disabled people who are uncertain about whether they will be back in employment in the first one or two months and about whether they might have to drop out accordingly. WECIL is helping people in the new deal scheme in Bristol throughout the first 12 months of their employment. My hon. Friend the Minister may correct me, but I understand that, since the report was published, the Government have lengthened the time for which benefit is available to people with a disability, to ensure that they have the confidence to take the first step into a job. While support is being given by people with a disability to help other disabled people to retain their jobs, their prospects become increasingly—dare I say it—rosy and positive.

On the same day that we visited WECIL, we saw the Government's new deal-sponsored pilot. Again, we met advisers who were new to the job and on a steep learning curve. They were not disabled and were appreciative, as we all are when we become involved in this area, of being humbled and learning that there is so much more to life than being an able-bodied person doing an ordinary job. Those advisers, some of whom came from working in the benefits system, said that they realised, for the first time, the inflexibility of the benefits scheme. We said to those people who had worked in the benefits system but were now advising disabled people on the new deal, "Please go back to the Department of Social Security and use your experience so that we can move forward, not only with the new deal but at the Department of Social Security." My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood explained some of those problems and quoted facts and figures. It is still not fair that progress is not being made. I am delighted to see what the Government are doing with the new deal and its extension. I am also delighted that we were able to learn from the situation in Bristol, and I commend the individuals in those organisations who have taught me and my hon. Friend a great deal.

Paragraphs 81 and 82 of the report deal with British sign language and the recommendations from the Royal National Institute for Deaf People. Recently, my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) introduced an Adjournment debate on British sign language and the importance of it being further acknowledged by the Government as a language. The report recommended that more help should be given for that. BSL is the first language of an estimated 50,000 people, 35,000 of whom are of working age, yet there are only 115 registered qualified sign language interpreters. We challenged the Government to see what could be done to increase the number of interpreters and communication support workers. I was somewhat disappointed with the response, which said:

> We are in discussion with the Royal National Institute for the Deaf, Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People and the Further Education Funding Council to discuss how best to increase the number of qualified interpreters and communicators.

Mr. Boswell: I very much endorse the hon. Lady's point. Does she share my concern about the fact that, when I recently asked the Government about that matter, they did not seem to know how many people were training for recognised qualifications? It is obviously essential that we should have some idea so that we are able to decide whether the activity needs to be expanded.

Valerie Davey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. I am sure that that information is now available as a result of his question. My experience is that people need interpreters to enable them to go for job interviews, and they need them quickly. It is no good to respond to an employer by saying, "I cannot come for an interview on that day. You will have to wait until an interpreter is available." That is inadequate. We must have more BSL interpreters to support people in getting back into work.

[Valerie Davey]

I want to mention one other aspect of the subject while I have the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister, who I know has a great interest in this matter—its relevance to education. Just outside the boundaries of my constituency is the Elmfield school for the deaf, which makes remarkably good provision for children at primary school level. At secondary school level, however, there is still uncertainty about the best way to educate bright youngsters, who need access to the full curriculum. Their integration into mainstream schooling with signers is one possibility, but if British sign language is registered as a language, there is a potential need for a school in which it is the main means of communication.

I do not want to end on that rather negative note. I welcome this far-reaching report; it makes important recommendations to which the Government have responded positively. I trust that my hon. Friend the Minister will take note of those two factors.

3.55 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): This has been a very positive debate. The Select Committee is to be congratulated on the excellence of its research and its genuinely innovative and imaginative recommendations. The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) set out a clear, forward-looking path, and I hope that we can proceed along it.

One of the fundamental principles that we should remember—I slightly misquote the famous American document—is that all of us are created equal. That does not mean that we are all identical, but that we are created with equal rights, equal opportunities, an equal entitlement to respect and an equal entitlement to the chance to make positive contributions to life, family and community.

In that spirit, I repeat what I said last year during our debates on the Disability Rights Commission Act 1999. I congratulate the Government on that legislation. Whatever turns out to be the historical verdict on this Administration—I suspect that we may differ on that—the Act will undoubtedly be recognised as having made a genuinely positive contribution to the history of these islands. I agree with the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) that it is easy to underestimate the likely impact of the commission. It will not be simply a talking shop; it will be a dynamic force that is likely to make a positive contribution to the lives of millions of people.

I strongly endorse what the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said about the report of the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation. He said that we should persuade employers of the need to break down the employment barriers for people with disabilities, and that they should recognise that a strong business and economic case can be made for doing so. Sensible employers and productive, forward-looking companies should recognise that they will have a future in the 21st century only if they harness every talent within their work forces—and within the pool from which they will select their future work forces. The country, too, must recognise that we shall succeed only if all those who live within our shores and boundaries feel that they can make positive contributions to the economy and to the community.

In that spirit, I welcome what the hon. Member for Kingswood said about the operation of the means test. I do not wish to repeat what he said, but I reinforce his comments about the fact that the Government should offset the economic and cost factors of means tests deterring people from working, whether full or part-time, against the revenue implications for the Government coffers. The Government should also recognise that we shall be a much healthier and more prosperous society if those barriers are removed. Some of the barriers against the employment of people with disabilities may be difficult to overcome; I shall deal with them later. However, barriers created by artificial rules, many of which were put in place years ago and interpreted by historical accident, can have a particularly damaging effect on people's chances of working. Those rules should be swept aside. I welcome what the Select Committee said about that.

The Minister may be relieved to hear that I might eventually differ with the Select Committee report, but I wanted to start in a positive manner. I also welcome the Government's response to the Select Committee's wish to extend the application of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to education. Putting obstacles or exemptions in the way of young people who want to go to school or further education college cannot be justified. The Government will have my support if they legislate this year, as their response says that they will, to remove those barriers. That would be positive and widely welcomed.

We need to be clear about training. The Select Committee made a recommendation that the Government, perhaps inadvertently, did not tackle. Paragraph 61 of the report recommends that serious consideration should be given to putting a person with direct personal experience of disabilities on the national Learning and Skills Council. The Government's response did not dismiss that, but neither did it address it directly.

I would be among the first to say that the national Learning and Skills Council needs to have a strong pro-business, pro-economy focus. It cannot represent different sectors of our economy and society. Equally, however, the report gives some striking statistics. Some 18 per cent. of people of working age are disabled and there is a huge difference between the unemployment levels for disabled and non-disabled people. Given those facts, the Government should make a great effort to find someone with a business background who has direct personal experience of disabilities. A person with a disability who has experience of running a business would be an ideal recruit to the Learning and Skills Council.

Mr. Boswell: I should like to reinforce my hon. Friend's point. We debated the composition of the Learning and Skills Council in Committee this morning with the Minister's colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks). He was not minded to specify slots on the council for interest groups. Will she pass on my hon. Friend's strong point to her colleague?

Mr. Collins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am sure that the Minister will take note of it.

There is a possible point of difference between us. I have stressed that we are at one with regard to the objectives and I genuinely congratulate the Government on the progress that they have made, but the Minister will not be surprised to learn that I do not differ from what my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) said about some of the benefits policies. The problem—I refer to it cautiously—was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland. I am concerned about how we make the small firm sector more accessible to people with disabilities. The right hon. Gentleman phrased his remarks admirably. His approach would command widespread respect in the small business community. He made it clear that small businesses are not run as a charity. We cannot rely on appealing to the conscience of the managing director. It is not enough to say that this is a social matter. For them, as for other businesses, decisions must be based on what makes business sense.

A large number of small businesses do not recognise that there is an overwhelming economic case for them to fish in a large pool. That is disproportionately in the interests of small businesses, which, by definition, have a small number of employees. It is important for them to ensure that every employee is as good as they can get. He or she should bring as many talents, aptitudes, skills and qualifications and as much devotion and dedication to their work as possible. That will often mean that the best person for them to hire is the person with a disability. Small businesses frequently do not recognise that. A lot of work is needed to make them understand that and realise that they are not being asked to undertake an onerous obligation because of political correctness. They are being asked to act in the interests of their future competitiveness. However, one of the characteristics of a Parliament is to recognise that virtues often need to be balanced. Virtue is often not to be found on only one side. If it were, there would be no point in democratic debate. Sensible debates such as this afternoon's recognise that people can reach similar conclusions from different starting points.

I know that the Government put great stress on the need to strengthen the competitiveness of our small business sector. That is where the great bulk of new jobs are being created. The Chancellor has made great efforts in successive Budgets to present himself as deregulating that sector and alleviating its burdens. We need to look to the example of the United States, which has some of the most pioneering disability legislation in the world. It is a very litigious society with a fundamental belief in rights, but it also recognises the distinction between what a small business and a large business can do. Our priority must be to get small businesses to grow into large ones. Microsoft was a very small company 25 years ago. I am sure that we are all familiar with the story of how Apple computers started with two people in a garage. We want that sort of small business growth in this country.

I hope that when the Minister considers the Select Committee recommendations, she will listen to representations from the small business community and consider making progress—and I do not dispute that much of what the Select Committee recommends is progress—slowly, cautiously and, perhaps, incrementally, rather than in a leap that might appear to some as a great step forward, but which, if it undermined the competitiveness of small businesses and, with that, the chance of a larger national cake, could damage the wider interests of the community.

Mr. Berry: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the reason for the small firm exemption in the Americans with Disabilities Act is that previous civil rights legislation on discrimination on grounds of race contained such an exemption? The exemption has nothing to do with disability issues. It is simply part of the tradition of equal rights legislation in the United States. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires only reasonable adjustments. Would not that be as feasible for a small firm as for a large firm?

Mr. Collins: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point. However, while his point about the origin of the exemptions to the American legislation is right, it does not apply only to civil rights legislation. Small businesses are exempt from a range of United States employment legislation on minimum wages, industrial relations and other matters. Many economists, academics and business people believe that that is why the United States has the best job creation record of any large industrialised nation and why its small businesses grow so rapidly. That is also why we should be careful.

I do not for a moment believe that any Member of Parliament has any but the best possible motives in arguing for the extension of regulation. There is no secret anti-business agenda. I do not buy that. I accept absolutely the purity of motive of all concerned. I hope that in exchange the hon. Gentleman will recognise that I am not arguing that small businesses either are or should be bad employers. I simply think that we should proceed step by step and cautiously, in ways that do not unnecessarily damage small businesses or frighten away investment in them.

The excellent Select Committee report makes various references to the need for high-quality evaluation and publication of results on the new deal for disabled people. Will the Minister be able to give us new information about the way in which the Government are assessing progress on the issue? Overall, the debate has been productive. I congratulate the Government on the progress made so far. I hope that they recognise that they will have all-party support for further progress and all-party pressure if they do not make it.

4.9 pm

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Evidence on the disadvantage of disabled people is unambiguous. Disabled people are generally less well qualified than their non-disabled counterparts. That is especially true at the lower end of the education spectrum. The proportion of disabled people of working age with no educational qualifications is twice that of non-disabled people. The clearest indication of the disadvantage of disabled people is the fact that they are so much less likely to be in the labour market as workers or even as job seekers. It is not surprising that the employment rate for disabled people is just 46 per cent., compared with more than 80 per cent. for non-disabled people.

Disabled people do not need charity. As other hon. Members have said, there is a strong business case for employing disabled people. That is spelled out in the

[Charlotte Atkins]

report, of which I was proud to have been a part-author. Some employers can be persuaded by social and moral arguments to employ people with disabilities. If we are to break down the barriers to employment that disabled people face, the much more persuasive approach will be to cite business arguments.

First, we often forget that disabled people are important customers for many organisations. If we can help companies to break down the barriers for their disabled customers, many will find that the attitudinal and physical barriers to employment will also be removed.

Secondly, there are clear benefits in having a diverse work force and ensuring that all candidates, irrespective of their disability, are considered for employment. In that way, the best person may be employed. Staff retention rates can benefit from the employment of people with disabilities, who are frequently more loyal to their employers. That can lead to a tremendous saving on staff turnover and advertising. These days, the public perception of an organisation is improved when the public see that a company employs people with disabilities.

It is vital that the Government help business to promote such good practice and to recognise the full benefits of employing disabled people. We have heard already that more than 1 million economically inactive disabled people would like to work, but are excluded from the labour market for a variety of reasons.

For some, therapeutic work could help. However, the current system of therapeutic work can act as a disincentive to disabled people trying out work. A constituent found occasional work as a film extra, despite having a severe back injury. He found that therapeutic, because he enjoyed it and because it gave him self-esteem. However, one day's work a week deprived him of his whole week's benefit. Having a wife and children, he could not sustain that loss. He was denied what could have been a valuable bridge into work.

The Select Committee heard from a personal adviser that a surprising number of applications for therapeutic work were being refused. The Mental Health Foundation told us that the uncertainty and confusion surrounding such work and the interpretation of the therapeutic earnings rules were particular problems. As a result, the Committee recommended that the Government should undertake a survey of requests for therapeutic work to discover what was happening in terms of acceptance and rejection. We have not had a response from the Government on that point. The Minister might take this opportunity to agree to undertake such a survey, unless it would be covered by the evaluation programme of the new deal for disabled people. The Government's approach was not clear from their response.

I highlighted at the outset of my remarks the particular disadvantage of disabled people in obtaining educational qualifications. That is a long-standing problem, although many colleges, including my local further education college in Leek, have a proud record of supporting disabled students. I once presented the certificates at Leek college's annual awards. The presentation is rather a formal affair and all the worthy people from the town are there, but that did not prevent me from receiving lovely big hugs from several students with learning disabilities, who were delighted that they had achieved certificates in vocational skills, life skills and other skills. They were so overwhelmed by what they had achieved that they will be set on the road to even greater things. They were a great example to others who had not overcome the tremendous problems that they had faced in getting to Leek and participating in the course. We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) about transport difficulties. However, the students to whom I refer had overcome all those things, which did a tremendous amount for their self-esteem and for the reputation of the college.

It is therefore welcome that the disabled student's allowance has recently been doubled. It has also been extended to students who choose to study part time, which was one of the report's recommendations. Many disabled students decide to take up the option of part-time study because it suits their circumstances. As we choose to widen access to further and higher education, it is vital that we promote the part-time route.

The Government have not recognised the needs of postgraduate students and of people taking on work experience placements. I understand that work placements are increasingly a part of undergraduate study, and I am concerned that disabled students might be disadvantaged. The disabled student's allowance is important, because it covers the additional costs faced by students because of their disabilities. Such costs could be incurred by a need for the attendance of a non-medical personal helper or for specialist equipment. Both elements are equally relevant to postgraduate students. Even if students had received some of the money as undergraduates, the equipment that they were able to purchase might need upgrading or replacing or their needs might have changed.

It is important to recognise the step forward that has been taken by extending the allowances to part-time students. However, they must be extended further. The number of students in the further education sector almost doubled in the three years following 1995, but many groups among them still suffer disadvantages, including those with significant impairments and mental difficulties, as well as young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties –about whom we talk a lot nowadays –who are still massively under-represented.

In their White Paper, "Learning to Succeed", the Government recognise a range of needs, acknowledging the need to widen access to education and training and the fact that meeting the needs of some groups is more costly than meeting those of others. Clearly, disabled students' needs will be more costly. The White Paper also places a strong emphasis on setting and monitoring standards. The monitoring must not concentrate only on examination results and drop-out rates. It must also take account of how well colleges extend and open up the opportunities for people with learning difficulties and those with disabilities.

I am pleased that the new Learning and Skills Council will have a particular duty to address the needs of learners with disabilities. I hope that we will address some of those issues in Standing Committee. The council will also consult voluntary and specialist

organisations, as well as user groups –that is extremely important –on how best to make provision both suitable and available. That could be a real watershed in opening up post-16 education to those who have received a poor deal on education.

4.20 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) and his Select Committee and welcome the report. The Select Committee tackled the subject comprehensively, sensitively and in a balanced way, and it produced sensible recommendations, which today's debate has shown are widely welcomed. When I arrived in the Room before the debate, there was a consensual all-party huddle going on, and there was some worry that the debate would be too consensual. The hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick), who is no longer in his place, shattered that with his opening remarks. Since then we have considered some of the details of the report and, although the debate is still consensual, some significant issues remain to be considered, which the Minister should address. Therefore, I shall do my best to keep my remarks as brief as possible.

All the contributions to the debate have been constructive, especially that of the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), whose knowledge and work is highly respected by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and that of the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley), who is no longer in his place. To be fair, in their three years in office, the Government have taken several significant steps in the right direction, with the introduction of the Disability Rights Commission, the new deal for disabled people pilot schemes and other measures. In contrast, the impact on disability benefits of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 was less good.

The Government's response to the Select Committee's report was co-operative and, by and large, they accepted the report's findings. We are debating how and when things will happen, rather than why the Government will not accept recommendations. I urge the Select Committee to follow up the report and review progress regularly, not simply to leave it on the shelf to gather dust.

One of the key comments in the report is that employers see, and are occasionally encouraged to see, disabled people as needy and demanding, which is simply wrong. The aim of the report is to remove barriers to work and education —a policy that the Liberal Democrats have supported for some time. In the welfare reform Green Paper, the Government made the reduction of discrimination against disabled people a benchmark of success. The Government have set themselves a standard and should say today precisely what progress has been made towards it and what further action is planned to meet and exceed it. Therefore, the debate is not so much about the principles of the report, which are strongly supported, but about putting them into action.

As has been said, employers have insufficient knowledge of the DDA. The question is whether that is best addressed by advertising. Several hon. Members have mentioned information about access to work. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People recently carried out a survey, which found that more than half of the companies (57 per cent.) stated that they were unaware of the Government funding available to support and make adjustments for disabled staff...Of companies with disabled people, nearly half were unaware of Access to Work.

A case study from the south of England highlighted the problems that disabled people suffer because they are not sufficiently supported by legal aid. A person wanting to go on a caravan holiday in a standard-rate caravan was told by the holiday proprietor that he would have to use a luxury caravan that was adapted for the purpose. He kicked up a fuss and the holiday company offered him a discount, but that was not made a general policy, nor did the company say that it was working to provide standard accommodation for disabled people. That person wished to pursue the matter through his solicitor, but found that he was unable to obtain the necessary legal aid.

The key question, which also relates to employment, is about the application of the law. It is an uphill struggle to get cases to court. What plans do the Government have to ensure that the DDA is applied more widely and that disabled people, who are often necessarily in straitened financial circumstances, are assisted in that process?

We heard earlier about children losing the use of equipment available to them at school when they to on to higher education. They have to go through a tortuous process to get replacement equipment. The Audit Commission report "Fully Equipped" identifies a variability of service across the country. I hope that the Minister will have the time to tell us the Government's response to that report.

Several hon. Members have drawn attention to the impact of the means testing of benefits, particularly of the independent living fund. The Select Committee took evidence from Colin Hughes, a BBC producer on a salary of £30,000 a year—a substantial salary in my part of the world. He is in two minds whether to continue working, because benefit has been withdrawn under the independent living fund. I am encouraged by comments from both sides of the Chamber and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr. Boswell: Everyone in the Chamber is familiar with that case. Does hon. Gentleman agree that it sends an appalling signal to all disabled people that they can succeed up to a certain point, but that those who want to get to the top of their profession and earn a really heavy salary are treated as if they should pay for all their care needs—with taxation on top? That is wrong.

Mr. George: I am grateful for that intervention. The point is well made. The Colin Hughes case shows that there is no incentive for disabled people to achieve highly paid positions.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: On the basis that Treasury Ministers and officials might read the record of this debate, perhaps it is worth pointing out that if, for example, a person's salary increased from £20,000 to £40,000, they would pay an extra £8,000 in tax. That is a fair contribution, and if taxation is a good way of making the provision, the fact that someone has overcome a condition and is contributing an extra £8,000 ought to be sufficient to satisfy the Treasury.

Mr. George: That point was ably made earlier by the hon. Member for Kingswood. There is clearly strong

[Mr. George]

feeling on both sides of the House about the change. It does not make sense. The cost to the taxpayer would be relatively small, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, and the Government must address the issue. We shall all be interested to hear the Minister's response.

Diana Holland of the Advisory Committee for Disabled People in Employment and Training has said that disabled people feel undermined and threatened by changes in benefit provision. Most pressing of all is the problem that disabled people still do not feel confident enough to try to obtain work, as the hon. Member for Daventry has pointed out, because they feel penalised for doing so. Those points have been ably raised by several hon. Members.

One would expect that people with certain types of disability would not be able to gain employment, especially in cases of progressive illness such as Parkinson's disease and cancer. However, disturbingly, any form of long-term disability appears to be a job handicap. That should not be the case. It is hard enough to cope with the burden of disability. To add to that the stigma of unemployment and the corresponding low income must be very difficult to bear.

The road to economic disadvantage often begins at an early age with educational disadvantage, as has been mentioned. The disabled are twice as likely to have no qualifications, which will reinforce a labour market disadvantage. I am reasonably confident that educational disadvantage can be overcome. The growth of inclusive education, the enhanced specialist status of many special schools, the rapid growth of information and communication technology and a more flexible approach to learning will pay off.

My parliamentary colleagues share the Government's view that social disadvantage must not be allowed to be an excuse for failure, and nor must disability. Before the Government rush to find their often-used targets pen, I must issue a word of caution. Students with disabilities need more than any other students to have individual goals rather than another raft of centrally prescribed targets.

For that reason, the Liberal Democrats have called for the Department for Education and Employment to provide an alternative framework of inspection for special schools, school units and individual children with statements. They are at present judged by the national norms and the conclusion to be drawn from the Ofsted inspections is, therefore, inevitable failure. It is too easy to write off individuals using those criteria, rather than allowing them to demonstrate achievement.

We are also aware that later in this Session the Department for Education and Employment will introduce a special needs and disability Bill, which will bring together existing legislation in a legislative framework for the future. The Bill must pick up some of the recommendations from this report. I should be interested to hear from the Minister which of its recommendations, if any, are likely to find their way into the Bill.

My hon. Friends and I have welcomed the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the setting up of the Disability Rights Commission. Neither will reduce the massive overt and covert discrimination that is sometimes, intentionally or unintentionally, expressed by employers, but we must still address these matters.

I have spoken to some employers who are apprehensive about employing a disabled person and regard the additional costs to the business as unhelpful. A number of hon. Members have drawn attention to the strong business case for employing disabled people highlighted in the report.

A case came to me from a local charity that employs a woman as an administrator using the access to work fund. The cost of making adaptations for her disability, which could be corrected by a cataract operation, will be £4,000. The grant that the charity will receive from the access to work fund is £3,000 and the cost of an operation on one eye, if it is done privately, is £2,100. However, she will have to wait for a year or more for the operation. Instead of the access to work fund being used to pay for adaptations, which will simply help her in the workplace and still leave her with a poor quality of life at home, she would benefit from evidence of more joined-up government in the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health. Certainly an early operation would not only ensure that she was an able employee, but would give her a much better quality of life, at no extra cost to the taxpayer.

Sadly, the aspiration that the new Learning and Skills Council will resolve the skills and education gap is a long way from becoming a reality. Little in the Learning and Skills Bill will make a measurable difference. My hon. Friends want the extension of the disabled student's allowance not only to postgraduates, but to further education students. Putting resources in the hands of disabled students or their carers is a positive move.

I have two further points. Travel costs to school, college or work are often a massive barrier to access for disabled people to education, training and work. The Select Committee's recommendation to extend the access to work scheme to include travel costs is an excellent one. There is a strong argument for including them in the disabled student's allowance, but travel costs in rural areas can be substantial and it may be better to establish a separate mechanism to deal with them. It is a pity that that was not included in the Transport Bill.

Finally, we must recognise that a small but significant number of adults with long-term disabilities will never be able to work without considerable assistance and support.

The Select Committee rightly urged a move away from the rigid application of an output-measured system towards new eligibility criteria for access, based on the level of support necessary to carry out a job and on individual needs. For many of us, work is an essential part of life. For people with long-term disabilities, work can be their salvation.

This is an excellent report and the Government have responded to it positively. I hope that its recommendations will be woven into the fabric of new and existing legislation, and that the Committee will follow the report's progress.

4.40 pm

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster). I enjoyed his opening remarks, and I look

forward to the concluding remarks of my hon. Friend the Minister. They were co-Chairs of the Committee on which I served when we initiated an inquiry on the subject, and I am delighted to be able to make a brief contribution to the debate on the report and the Government's response.

My interest lies in employment—I participated in the employment side of the Select Committee—and I want to ensure that the Government's drive for full employment does not cast disabled people aside. Given the Government's emerging labour market policies, that should not happen in theory or in practice. There are programmes that deliberately target the registered unemployed and the economically inactive. In such an approach, employment is central to macroeconomic policy, in marked contrast to the attitude of Administrations of the recent past. Such an approach also benefits the local economy by increasing participation rates, which strengthens local prosperity. As a result, the point at which the labour market tightens and inflationary pressures creep in is put back. That approach to employment benefits individuals by increasing their independence and their personal and family income. It also benefits the country's finances by reducing welfare benefits bills.

For people defined as disabled under the DDA, there is day one access to the new deal programmes, which are the main instrument of labour market support. Evidence gathered by the Select Committee suggests that participation rates for disabled people in the mainstream programmes are pretty good. Paragraph 103 of the report shows that 13 per cent. of participants in the new deal for young people and 19 per cent. in the new deal for adults are disabled. Those are high participation rates and the drop-out rates are lower than for non-disabled new deal clients.

Nevertheless, there remains a nagging doubt. In giving evidence, Scope told the Select Committee that the Government are not tracking the number of disabled people who are unable to gain access to those programmes and to benefit from the service. In other words, as Scope says, the potential demand for new deal programmes among disabled people is unknown. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to reconsider surveying the extent of this potential problem.

The new deal for disabled people remains a pilot-based programme, with decisions on national roll-out to be taken—to use that classic civil service phrase—in due course. However, this will not be a straightforward decision for Ministers. In this and every other policy area relating to disability, there is a debate about specialist services versus mainstreaming. That is as true for this issue as for, say, education and housing.

While the new deal for disabled people is still a pilot, I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to introduce new pilots that focus on the retention in employment of disabled people, rather than welfare to work programmes that pick disabled people up after they have lost their attachment to the labour market. After all, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland said, two thirds of people of working age who become disabled are in jobs when the disability first occurs.

The raw figures in the report show irresistibly that there is a problem of discrimination for disabled people in employment. Only half of disabled people of working age are economically active, compared to 85 per cent. of those who are not disabled. Disabled people who are economically active are twice as likely to be unemployed as their non-disabled counterparts. The unemployment rate for disabled people is a little over half that of non-disabled people, while 1 million economically inactive disabled people would like to work. The testimony of individuals in successive surveys also makes it clear that discrimination remains a problem for disabled people in the world of work.

While I warmly welcome the Government's decision to extend the DDA to education and training, I would not leap to the same legislative answer for employment. I am content to allow the new Disability Rights Commission to test its mettle on that. Like the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins), I believe that it will be a dynamic force such as has never before been available for disabled people.

The Government should do three things. First, they should step up the work that is done with employers. I applaud the direction that the Committee's report gives to the Government in that respect, and the emphasis that it places on the business case for employers considering the employment of disabled people. Secondly, they should step up work with agencies that assist disabled people, and make the link with the needs of employers. Paragraph 19 of the report states that the Employers Forum on Disability noted in evidence:

> Such organisations tend to emphasise moral and legal obligations to employers and to characterise disabled people as needy, vulnerable and different, rather than as people with valuable talents and skills.

If disabled people are to be helped into the kinds of jobs that they can do, the Employment Service and other agencies must sharpen up their understanding of employers and their presentation of the business case to employers. Once disabled people are in jobs, the evidence suggests that employers recognise them as a valued and important part of the work force.

Thirdly, the Government should step up their efforts to improve support provision. I draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister to the report's access to work recommendations, to which the Government's response has been uncharacteristically weak in comparison with other areas. The Employers Forum on Disability noted cases of unconscionable delays in the supply of aids, which, as they put it, inflates the aggro cost for employers in employing disabled people.

In recent weeks, the Audit Commission has published a powerful report on the supply of equipment to disabled people in the health and social care fields. I urge the Minister to pre-empt any similar report on employment. After all, the Prime Minister and the Government warmly welcomed the report . I look forward to a similar development on the provision of aids in employment for disabled people.

In conclusion, I have been enormously encouraged by the debate. At the middle and end of the 1980s, I worked as a disability rights campaigner for several disability organisations. During that period there was a stark difference between the views of the two main parties on disability, which is in strong contrast to what we have heard this afternoon. Hon. Members from all parties have made supportive comments and offered congratulations for many of the steps that the

[Mr. John Healey]

Government have taken. A consensus has emerged about what has been done and what remains to be done. That consensus and sense of common purpose—it is almost common sense—will considerably benefit disabled people in the future.

4.49 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I join in congratulating the Select Committee on a most thoughtful and constructive report and the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) on his good introduction to this debate. In parenthesis, perhaps I may say—I do not always have occasion to say it—that the Government's response to the report has been, if not an unqualified success, at least one that showed signs of hope, although there are areas of deficiency in it. Those have been referred to in contributions by hon. Members on all sides of the Chamber in a thoroughly constructive debate. I shall not single out any speeches, as I believe that all hon. Members have had something worth saying, even if I did not agree with every last word. That perhaps reflects, as the hon. Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) has just said, a growing consensus across the parties on disability issues, which I do not intend to disturb in my remarks.

The single most striking factor to emerge from the Select Committee report, which provided us with details of something that we may have intuited before, was the much higher unemployment among disabled persons of economically active age, alongside the fact that at least a million of them claimed that they wished to take employment and were barred from doing so. The report tries to match up that imbalance.

I shall pick out various themes from the debate, touching first on small firms. When we discuss regulation or the taking forward of good social welfare policies, particularly when they bear on employment, I am often struck by the fact that we are talking to ourselves, because many small firms will not participate in the discussion. I suspect that they would not do so even if we were to lower the threshold rapidly, and would regard the sudden arrival of an enforcement action as capricious, because they had not registered it. Our most important obligations are to recognise the difficulty of communicating with small firms and to impart to them the highest standards of good practice and role models wherever possible. If this difficulty with small firms is to be addressed, it should be done by encouragement, stimulation and good example long before the arm of regulation can tackle it.

That is in no sense to say that I have any difficulty with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which was, of course, introduced by the Conservative Government, and we have signalled our acceptance of the new Disability Rights Commission. As I have said privately to the Minister, but perhaps I should put it on the record, I admire the selection of people for the new commission that she and her colleagues have made. It is a group of big hitters who will do a very good job. They will understand that the commission must establish itself and its credibility to support the interests of disabled people across the sector. Understandably, its main emphasis initially will be on advice, support and encouragement—for example, by action plans wherever possible—but I would not rule out the taking of evidence at an early stage to encourage others if people are cocking a snook at the clear legal rights that are being imparted. However, all the talk of enforcement will be as nothing if there is not a change in attitudes. I think that that is accepted across our discussions on disability.

There are two or three omissions in the report. First, there is, surprisingly, no clear reference to the role of unions, given how keen the Government are on partnership. Trade unions and employers would be tailor-made to work together in this area to spread good practice as well as to advocate the rights of individual employee members of unions.

Secondly, we must promote the dissemination of good practice through organisations such as the Employers Forum on Disability and show that it is not unreasonably costly or impossible to achieve.

Thirdly, the Government, through their Departments and agencies, should set a good example. I have interested myself recently in asking about Departments' membership of the Employers Forum on Disability. I found that there is no central direction and that, although quite a few Departments are members, others are not. I have also examined the different handling criteria and performance standards for the working families tax credit and the disabled persons tax credit. They are widely disparate, as was shown in a written answer to me only yesterday from the Paymaster General, with the implication that something will have to be done about it.

I welcome the extension of disability rights to education. I was an education Minister when the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was introduced five years ago and there were good bureaucratic reasons—there always are—for not going ahead at the time, whatever reservations we may have had. We are going ahead now and, without being recriminatory to any party, the history is what motor car companies like to call a policy of continuous improvement. We are moving forward by continuously making changes for the good.

We look forward to the special needs and disability rights Bill when it is introduced following the consultation document, which has already been published. There may be genuine tension for the Minister. She will need to explore carefully the awkward marriage of rights in the 1995 concept with the professional judgment of special needs, together with the enforcement and redress arrangements. There are also doubts about compliance costs in higher and further education, which was one of the factors that we weighed when we excluded education. I am discouraged by the fact that the Government appear to be somewhat coy about carrying out a compliance cost assessment in higher education on the grounds that it is publicly funded and, therefore, is not an issue. I hope that the Minister will consider that.

The creation of jobs is central to the report. It should always be remembered that many disabled people do an ordinary job with or without assistance and have been able to do so for many years. It should also be noted that physical disabilities may be particularly difficult for people in manual work. Advice is important and support must be supplemented, according to ability,

with aids, education and training, which is now a much more continuous process than it was years ago, to fit disabled people for their work activities.

One matter that has been somewhat underplayed in our debate, but to which some contributors have referred, concerns people with degenerative conditions in work—for example, people whose hearing is failing or those who have established physical disabilities such as Parkinson's disease. It is important—it is also a right—that their employers provide reasonable adjustments or offer other suitable work within the firm rather than simply showing them the door.

Nevertheless, we must accept that many employees will have to or will choose to go into supported employment. I am pleased that peace seems to have broken out in the awkward issues concerning Remploy, which has a new and strong chairman, but I am concerned about the supply of places in supported employment A survey commissioned by the Minister's Department suggested that the number of supported employment places that will be required in the next few years may be as high as 180,000. Recent written answers suggest that the rate of creation of such new places is only 1,000 or 2,000 a year. That is totally inadequate.

There is a general welcome in the report for the access to work scheme, which was, to stress the point, introduced by the Conservative Government. It is also understood that there are defects and deficiencies in the scheme, and I hope that the Minister will pick up the points made about the need to address them positively, especially with regard to people who did not apply for 100 per cent. support in the six-week qualifying period.

It is worth remembering that access to work is not a hugely expensive scheme. I acknowledge what the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) has said on that matter. It is not as if a vast quantity of taxpayers'money is being paid out disproportionately to the benefit derived. The average cost is a remarkably reasonable £1,200, and the figures for last year show that 16,000 people were helped for a total cost of £19.5 million. That is not a big sum for such big leverage for the interests of disabled people. It is important that the scheme expands, and there is evidence that it will do so this year.

In addition, the Employment Service helps 88,500 people into employment each year. We should look at figures for retention, both in respect of that scheme and the new deal, to see how many will stay in those jobs. Such programmes offer practical help to people in overcoming their difficulties with transport, perhaps, or physical needs. I agree with the Select Committee that we need to emphasise the promotion of awareness. I hope that the Minister will accept the importance of increasing understanding among employers and employees of the access to work scheme.

There is also the question of equipment and aids. Some hon. Members have mentioned the recent Audit Commission report. Many things that may be beneficial to an individual in terms of quality of life are also important for their ability to carry out their work. The new generation of hearing aids would be an example.

The Select Committee makes the interesting suggestion that there should be some kind of regional resource centre or pool of equipment for education. I suggest a variant of that idea, as I am not sure that the concept need be confined to education. It could also be applied to facilities and equipment that might be made available to promote access to work. However, I do not really want to see a regional pool of equipment—a stockpile of wheelchairs, as it were. A more modern and constructive idea might be an information technology network that would establish where the equipment was and what need there was for it, and make arrangements for sharing it around, perhaps including sharing between employers who could work together. It need not only be equipment; it could also be used to deploy human resources such as interpreters, who could be brought in to help with employment interviews.

Finally, there is the issue of benefits. We all have to start with the simple fact that disabled people have disabilities, some of which are such that people may face a practical bar to work in the commercial sector. That may be because they cannot generate enough value to cover the costs of their employment or for reasons of health and safety. I am anxious that no one should be allowed to use those considerations as excuses. It is entirely contrary to the principles of disability rights legislation that people should use any excuses to deter people from seeking employment. Equally, however, there will be cases for which it is impossible to find a solution. Given that all disabled people, whatever the extent of their disabilities, will have a heightened sensitivity about such matters, it is particularly important that both the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service should be responsive to their needs and, as far as possible, emphasise incentives and avoid using cudgels.

I shall observe with interest the new personal capacity assessment, which contains some positive concepts. It tries to concentrate on what people can do, rather than what they cannot do. That idea has been lifted from the private sector, and puts a positive emphasis on people's abilities. There is also some merit in the concept of the personal adviser, as outlined in the new deal for disabled people. In passing, I should point out to the hon. Member for Wentworth that the Minister confirmed yesterday in a written answer that that provision will roll out nationally in June. We welcome that, although we may have reservations about its cost-effectiveness. We also need reassurance that personal advisers will be suitably equipped to help with particular cases, or will have access to experts. A GP who does not deal with a particular issue may not be able to offer real help.

In respect of benefits, we must above all avoid the perverse effects, to which the hon. Member for Kingswood referred with eloquence and passion, associated with means-testing. He and others mentioned the personal assistance trap, and reference has been made to particular cases of it. An interesting comment was made in the Scope briefing. It states:

> There is an inherent tension between the Government's aims...of "making work pay", and its more general policy objective of "targeting" resources on those most in need.

That tension must be acknowledged. It will not be easy to find a sensitive answer, but one must be found. We must acknowledge that disabled people at all income levels often face higher education and training costs; they certainly face higher costs in terms of getting to work, and in the work environment. In certain cases, they may impose higher costs on employers. Those costs must be recognised, and should not be used to subvert their intention to work.

[Mr. Tim Boswell]

This entire debate, and the spirit in which people have spoken, is essentially about empowering disabled people to function in a modern economy—to do what they can without being coerced. It is about disabled people developing their careers to the limits of their abilities, with suitable public assistance. If we use examples of good practice and role models where possible, necessary adjustments can be made at a reasonable cost in the private sector and where public money is spent. Those adjustments constitute good value, and will benefit the individuals concerned greatly. The costs of accommodation are marginal, but if we do not take the matter seriously and get all the agencies concerned to work together, it will be a waste for the economy and a sad and unworthy set-back for disabled people, who have so much to offer.

5.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), other members of the Select Committee and their advisers on producing an excellent report that will continue to inform Government policy. I feel like a poacher turned gamekeeper, but the report probably made my job a little easier, because it contained much meat with which I agreed. In the privileged position that I now hold, I can move matters forward for disabled people.

This afternoon's debate has been extremely constructive. It is heartening to see a consensus developing across the Floor on the many difficult and challenging issues that the Government are attempting to tackle. Only the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) cast a slur on the Government during the debate. I regret that, because other Conservative Members recognised that during our three years in government we have achieved a great deal to further civil rights for disabled people and to improve and enhance the quality of their lives. I am proud of that record. Without the support and campaigning efforts of many Labour Members, we would not have got as far as we have.

The Disability Rights Commission will be a strong, independent and powerful voice on behalf of disabled people. I have met members of the commission a couple of times; they are a fantastically good, coherent group. I am delighted that, for the first time, someone with a learning disability is sitting on a Government body, as well as someone with cerebral palsy, both of whom will make solid contributions to the commission's work. To reassure the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George), the commission will have resources to fund action, especially test cases, to further disabled people's rights under existing legislation.

We are implementing part III of the 1995 Act and steaming ahead with the disability rights task force recommendation. I was delighted to hear cross-party support for our proposed legislation on education and discrimination against people in schools, colleges and universities. I look forward to the full support of Conservative Members to ensure that we can place those measures on the statute book as soon as possible.

I shall respond to some of the points raised by hon. Members during the debate. We are taking action to improve access to school buildings, colleges and universities. For example, the access funds have increased by 50 per cent. this year, we have set aside £100 million to improve access to school buildings and action is being taken by the Further Education Funding Council and the Higher Education Funding Council to promote the inclusion of disabled people in their courses and to improve access to the courses in a range of ways. Those are good steps forward.

I agree with hon. Members' comments about the task that we all face in tackling discrimination against disabled people in their daily lives. For many disabled people, things that we take for granted are just not there. We must promote that cultural change throughout our society, whether in the House, among employers or among suppliers of goods and services. We have begun that massive task through a wide range of initiatives, such as the controversial, but effective, "see the person" campaign. I am discussing with the shadow Disability Rights Commission how we can work together to take the campaign for culture change forward.

The Committee's report primarily addressed tackling the barriers to employment. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland, who said that that is about not only introducing a welfare to work strategy, but creating a just society. I warmly endorse the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey). The issues that the Committee addressed go to the heart of what the Government are about. We are trying to create a link between economic prosperity and social inclusion, viewing them as interlinked, rather than competing, objectives. We will build a successful economy only if we include everyone in our society and make the most of the talents of every member of it—in this case, disabled people.

The statistics are stark. Many hon. Members have referred to them, so I shall not waste our time by going through them again. However, I should like to refer to a couple of matters that were not covered. There are 2.6 million disabled people currently locked into dependency on benefit and, as the Committee pointed out in its report, 1 million of them want to work. We also know that 400,000 of them are probably ready to work. The fact that those 400,000 people are not currently in employment is a matter that must be tackled swiftly, because it could make an enormous difference to their lives and to the economy in the way illustrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth.

We must also note that while we talk about disabled people in the round, the issues that confront them vary according to the nature of their disabilities. Those with a mental illness, to whom the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) referred, are far less likely to be able to access jobs than, for example, those with a hearing impairment. The figures in the report demonstrate that. I have been shocked when people with disabilities, especially those with mental health problems, tell me that they would rather explain the gap in their employment history by saying that they had been in prison than admitting to having had an acute mental illness episode. We need to tackle that kind of fear and discrimination in our welfare to work programme for disabled people.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned the geographical distribution of figures. There are stark differences. In the north-east, 24 per cent. of the long-term unemployed are disabled people, whereas the national figure is 19 per cent. and the figure for the south-east is 16 per cent. There is a strong correlation between structural unemployment on a geographical basis and the incidence of disability. We must ask why. We have to tackle the underlying economic problems as part of the strategy for ensuring employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

To respond to the hon. Member for Worthing, West, we regularly publish figures on employment for disabled people. The labour force survey data are published quarterly, and they show the rates of employment for each disability. I am sure that he will be able to find that information in the Library.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: I shall not ask the Minister to respond to this question now, but it should form part of our discussions. The condition of alcoholism tends not to be defined in these terms, but it is disabling to many people for quite long periods. Perhaps, in time, we should have a separate session on the issue.

Ms Hodge: Yes, I hear that. I want to deal very briefly with the benefits issues, not because they are unimportant, but because I want to cover a great deal in the remaining minutes.

We need to do a lot to ensure that dependency on benefits does not become a trap that denies people the opportunity to work. I am working with my colleagues in the Department of Social Security and the Department of Health on tackling many of those issues. However, I want to place on the record that we have already done quite a lot. We have introduced the linking rule, which takes away much of the fear felt by disabled people that if employment does not work out for them, they will lose their benefit. The 52-week linking rule is important.

The introduction of the disabled persons tax credit and the fast track that will come into force shortly will make work pay for more disabled people. We increased the earnings disregard in the recent Budget. We have raised the level of therapeutic earnings and will do so again in line with the increase in the minimum wage. We have introduced the minimum wage, which is important to disabled people, and other initiatives such as work preparation, the supported employment programme—about which I shall say more later—and the access to work programme.

We are currently reviewing the access to work programme to make it more efficient. We are carrying out a customer survey on it, a focus group is working with us to find mechanisms to improve it and we are reviewing its timings and examining the geographical differences that occur within it. We hope to improve the quality of the programme, but it is nevertheless one of our success stories. Its budget was increased this year by £4.33 million and we shall try to augment that in our bid for this round of the comprehensive spending review. The programme is undoubtedly one of our most successful levers for supporting people into work.

We have also introduced helpful benefit changes, such as the job finder's grant and job match payment. We can never go far enough and quickly enough on all the issues that hon. Members wish us to. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) acknowledged, we have improved matters on the difficult issue of the independent living fund, which is a good move forward. The figures that he gave reflect the number of people who benefit from access to that fund. It is a limited fund, but I have no doubt that we could treble it and probably enable many more people to benefit from it. We must retain some form of means test in a scheme that can pay up to £32,500, which is a great deal of money for a limited fund. We accepted that the old rules were too tight, hence the improvement, but we must keep the scheme under constant review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) raised the issue of postgraduate allowances for disabled students. We hope that the new Learning and Skills Council will address that. I hope that she, too, will acknowledge that we have made progress in ensuring that part-time students can now have access to those benefits.

Mr. Tredinnick *rose—*

Ms Hodge: I shall keep going, as I have only a little time left.

Mr. Tredinnick: I just want to speak briefly, as the only dissident voice. I hope that the Minister will not forget the problem that was mentioned earlier of the shortage of suitable wheelchairs and other disability equipment in the NHS.

Ms Hodge: I might not have forgotten that point even if the hon. Gentleman had not interrupted me, but I shall try to cover it.

I wanted to talk about support for employers. We face an immense task in working with employers to persuade them of the business case, as many hon. Members have said. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland, my hon. Friends the Members for Staffordshire, Moorlands and for Wentworth and the hon. Members for St. Ives (Mr. George) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) all referred to it. I have often pointed out in various forums that the spending power of disabled people is more than £40 billion. It is nonsense for businesses not to have regard to that.

I want briefly to mention two cases of good practice. B&Q recognised the business case of providing goods for disabled people by producing kitchens that can be customised for disabled people. When it started selling the kitchens in its stores, disabled people began applying to the company for jobs, so there was a double benefit.

Centrica—one of our partners in the new deal pilot—had not employed disabled people before. When I went to see the company in Manchester, I met a profoundly deaf man who had been out of work for five years before joining the pilot scheme. Centrica was surprised that his productivity was double that of anybody else at his work station. Apart from that, I was heartened that the people he was working with had started to learn how to sign, so other barriers were being broken down. Centrica is now routinely employing disabled people in the workplace.

We are doing a great deal. Equality Direct will come on stream in the autumn of 2000; we have our "see the person" campaign; we have the DDA helpline, which

[Ms Hodge]

takes 500 calls a week and has put out 2 million pieces of paper; we are developing examples of good practice; and we are working to give employers more information about what is happening.

The threshold issue is a difficult one. We now have the power to move by stages towards ensuring that everybody has the right not to be discriminated against, whatever the size of the work force. I accept the argument about small and medium-sized enterprises. We want to move forward with employers consensually. That is why we took the power in the legislation.

I can give my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) good news about British sign language. We have now agreed with the Royal National Institute for Deaf People to help fund the training of 20 extra interpreters over the next three years and we are discussing with the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People how training can best be developed to secure a better long-term supply of trained interpreters.

I should tell the hon. Member for Bosworth that this week I opened a new facility for providing wheelchairs in Wigan and Leigh. That is an exemplar of brilliant practice that I hope that we can emulate elsewhere. For the same money that was given to the regional resource, it provides a far better service. Once a person is assessed, a wheelchair is provided virtually on demand, unless it requires special adaptation. Sixty per cent. of wheelchairs are recycled, and far more people are helped. Those are examples that we will take forward.

I can reassure Opposition Members that we are evaluating the new deal for disabled people. A relevant report was published at the end of last year, and another will be published at the end of this year. We will take the new deal forward, and I hope to set out our proposals in June. The new deal will be very exciting. We are considering two methods: roll-out of the pilots, which will provide a national framework, and getting intermediaries to work with us. Having learned from the pilots, we need to improve the employability of disabled people, but we also need to break down employer prejudice. The roll-out of the new deal requires a capacity to broker between the abilities of individual disabled people and the needs of employers.

This is not a new deal in the traditional sense. It will use intermediaries and job brokers, as I describe them, to work in a discrete geographical area, or with a particular disability, to forge links between the employer and the disabled person. As I said, I hope to be able to make an announcement on that in June.

Hon. Members will be delighted to hear that we are also working on retention pilots. We hope to announce progress by the summer, if not earlier, and launch them at the beginning of next year. Every week, 3,000 people move from statutory sick pay to incapacity benefit and only 10 per cent. subsequently return to the labour market. We are working with colleagues in health, social services and social security to deal with those shocking statistics. It is clear that if we can intervene at an early stage to prevent people from moving from statutory sick pay to incapacity benefit, we can keep them in work. I hope to bring forward proposals for innovative pilots that will involve job retention advisers working in GPs' surgeries and hospitals, and in health action zones. We must deal with the insurance industry, which has an interest in mental health issues, to see whether progress can be made.

We are also reviewing the supported employment programme, because we want to support more people. At the moment, only 2 per cent. of those involved in the programme progress to a mainstream job. In today's world, that level of progression is not good enough. We must regard the supported employment resource not as a final answer for disabled people, but as a way for many—although not all—to train, develop and progress to independent or supported employment in a mainstream setting.

We have reached the end of what has been a very good debate. This is third Westminster Hall debate in which I have participated, all of which were conducted under your good chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is heartening to see that so many people have chosen to stay and participate in this debate on a Thursday, when there is only a one-line Whip.

I congratulate the Select Committee on a good, thorough and important piece of work. I shall have regard to it in the work that I do, and I look forward to working with the Select Committee, so that we can put some of those ideas into practice and bring real opportunity to people with disabilities.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 April 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Tobin Tax

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Robert Ainsworth.*]

10 am

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): May I begin by saying how grateful I am to have secured the debate, given the competition with other hon. Members for debates in Westminster Hall? I am particularly grateful, as this is an opportune time to debate the subject.

In case anyone in the room does not know what a Tobin tax is, perhaps I had better briefly explain that it is a shorthand way to describe a tax on foreign currency exchange. It is named after Senator Tobin, a Canadian who devised the idea some years ago. I have tabled a parliamentary question on the subject, so I know the Government's view: they reject the idea on the grounds that

it would be almost impossible to achieve a global coverage, and there would be huge scope for avoidance.—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 188W.]

However, I am not sure whether the advisers in the Treasury are familiar with the work of some highly qualified people who believe that the proposal should be considered, as it is workable and could create enormous benefit worldwide.

A highly regarded economist and former adviser to the Canadian Government, Dr. Rodney Schmidt, recently attended a series of War on Want-sponsored meetings. He argued that, due to changes in technology and banking practices, a Tobin tax would be relatively easy and cheap to impose. He said that the tax could be applied to all deals through the settlement system, which tracks every trade and would be unavoidable. Evasion of the tax and the establishment of Tobin tax havens would be impossible. Dr. Schmidt's paper is available from War on Want. Even if his case were incorrect and the tax were not totally unavoidable, it would be largely unavoidable and should be explored.

An international group interested in the Tobin tax met in Cologne at the G8 summit in June. It heard that a more sophisticated version of the tax with a variable rate could be used to put a stop to the kind of speculation that undermined the south-east Asian tiger economies in 1997-98. A loose grouping of non-governmental organisations and campaigning groups has set up an electronic bulletin board that will allow future research and co-ordination of activities. There are now many international Tobin tax websites, and War on Want can supply a list of those that it considers best informed.

The tax has political support. In this country alone, about 100 Members of Parliament from all the major parties have expressed support for it, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) on his activities on the subject. The Trades Union Congress backs the Tobin tax, and a fringe meeting with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development at last year's Labour party conference attracted more than 200 delegates. Thousands of War on Want members and supporters are keen on the idea, and it is no wonder that people are so interested. Levelled at a modest rate—say 0.25 per cent.—it could raise the astonishing figure of $250 billion a year to help fight poverty and calm down volatile markets.

Who would be upset if the tax were imposed? Apparently, HSBC, NatWest and Barclays are major players in the currency trading markets. Pension funds, hedge funds, insurance companies, trans-national groups and some rich individuals play the currency market. It would be interesting to know what profits are made from currency speculation. By way of a few examples, however, I learnt that NatWest made £432 million profit from currency trading in 1998 and that the Hong Kong and Shanghai bank claimed £2.3 million profit a day from currency speculation.

The volume of foreign exchange trading has grown over the years and far outstrips the amount necessary for trade. Up to $2 trillion a day is traded, but only 5 per cent. is necessary to finance trade in goods and services. If asked to consider the matter, most people would not believe that; they would think that currency speculation was to do with buying goods and services. However, very little of it is, and the rest of the $2 trillion represents speculative activity. In 1975, 80 per cent. of foreign exchange transactions were trade related.

Those who are busily engaged in mopping up so much money for no productive effort could easily cope with a small universal tax on their transactions. The banks already levy pretty hefty charges. The margin between buy and sell rates for foreign exchange is a sight more than 0.25 per cent, as we can see for ourselves next time we go on holiday and buy pesetas or drachmas. If banks can get away with that, why is it so difficult for Governments to tax currency speculators by a tiny amount? One argument is that the tax could reduce international trade by increasing costs. However, trade is an essential activity, so a small tax is unlikely to kill it. War on Want recommends a very modest rate of 0.25 per cent., but the level would be up for discussion if the principle were agreed.

Let us consider avoidance and evasion. At present, 84 per cent. of all foreign exchange transactions occur in only nine countries. We would not, therefore, need worldwide accord to create a workable tax regime. War on Want recommends that the tax should be created through an international agreement backed by national legislation and the national central bank should collect it when transactions occur. The setting up of a global settlement bank—the continuous linking settlement bank—in mid-2000 will make such taxation simpler to carry out.

It is hardly reasonable to argue that the tax will fail because speculators will find ways around it. Our current taxes present the same problems, but the fact that big businesses attempt to evade or avoid corporation tax does not prevent us from imposing it. If people were determined to evade a microscopic tax such as the Tobin tax, they would have to go to the considerable expense of carrying out their transactions in a non-Tobin tax country, which is likely to be more costly than the tax itself. It is a matter of finding the right

[Mrs. Maria Fyfe]

level of tax, so that we have an effective deterrent against such a strategy. Besides, the money involved in evading the tax must come back into official world markets, and it could be taxed more heavily as a deterrent against such a ploy.

The Treasury's view is that there are already high transaction costs on speculation. The Government are taking measures to redesign the international financial architecture, but there is concern that the Tobin tax campaign could detract from them. In that case, we need to hear more about those measures and what they are intended to do. If they involve a tax, the Treasury has presumably found a way to overcome at least substantial avoidance and evasion; if they do not, what are they? Would they promote stability better than a Tobin tax? Would they raise a large sum as cheaply and easily as a Tobin tax? Could they help to create a substantial fund for international development and to support countries through disaster relief? If the Treasury's proposed measures are all those things, I hope that we shall soon hear about them; if they are not, I wonder what reasons it has for introducing them.

Granted, there may be technical difficulties with the Tobin tax, but the issue remains whether the tax would offer a nation or the globe greater net benefit than leaving the problem unaddressed. Has a better alternative somehow escaped our attention? The European Union funds its infrastructure through a supranational VAT collected by each member state, with each state keeping 10 per cent. of the revenue that it collects. If that can be done, why is a Tobin tax so difficult? It probably comes down to this: do we believe that we should have an international economic order based on openness, multilateralism and co-operation? If so, how will we create it? Global wealth is increasing by hundreds of billions of dollars every year. The funds and the knowledge exist to end absolute poverty and conserve our planet. Will we allow the greed of the few to override the needs of the many?

On that subject, I will quote from an article sent to me by Mr. Gary Brisley, a senior currency trader at NatWest for several years, in which he says:

> Speculation does not arise because of market consensus about economic fundamentals. That is just a fantasy story created by the markets to disguise the ugly truth of what they really do. In fact, the majority of traders have very little economic expertise at all. What dealers have is a gambler's instinct for a one-way bet and a quick profit. To be frank, they would be equally at home plying their trade in a Las Vegas casino...A speculation tax would be the first step on the road to restoring some sanity to a global economic madhouse run by a minority for a minority.

To conclude, it is always possible to find reasons not to do things. If we want to find reasons to explore the Tobin tax, we are not short of them: there is massive world poverty and there are huge environmental problems. Millions of dollars in relief are required to cope with disasters. If another way exists to raise money globally for such endeavours, let us hear it. However, we should not dismiss out of hand a proposal that has a huge amount of expertise behind it. For that reason alone, the Tobin tax demands serious investigation.

10.12 am

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) on securing a debate that is of key significance and importance, and I am pleased to take part in it. I approach the subject as someone who has been fortunate enough in recent years to make Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visits to sub-Saharan African countries: Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania and Ghana. We can observe nations and developments from afar, but visiting places, meeting people and seeing the circumstances in which they live are of vast importance in shaping people's attitudes about what needs to be done in the modern world.

However, I will start by mentioning Arthur Schopenhauer, a 19th-century German philosopher, who became known as the philosopher of pessimism. He subverted Leibnitz's phrase and said that everything is for the worst in the worst of all possible worlds. If Schopenhauer were alive today, he would find plenty in third-world nations that would allow him to add to that analysis of despair, such as the floods in Mozambique and the horrors experienced by people trying to survive in those circumstances, starvation in Ethiopia, and ethnic cleansing and its consequences in Kosovo. Those are just today's recent problems that we have all observed on television screens in our living rooms.

However, the media misses and never observes much suffering elsewhere. For example, last year's massive problems in Somalia did not hit our screens. There is poverty, exploitation and environmental deterioration in much of the third world. Because of its extreme poverty, few trees are left in Malawi. It has no source of fuel and is open to environmental devastation as well as serious economic problems with its future energy supplies.

Adverse economic and social conditions lead to collapse and conflict throughout the world, even in slightly more advanced nations than the third world. I am sure that economic problems and international indebtedness were major factors in the break up of Yugoslavia. The problems in Northern Ireland could surely be tackled more readily if there were an improvement in economic and social conditions. Nation after nation in sub-Saharan Africa is caught up in indebtedness and we are thankful that the Government have taken a lead in tackling international debt. Christian Aid and others rightly want the Government to go further and their campaigns should be noted carefully by the Treasury. The Government can pick up and run with the Tobin tax and take the moral lead. They can tackle the problem of indebtedness.

Third-world nations suffer adverse terms of trade in, for example, coffee or timber—or even gold, in the case of Ghana. When its price falls on world markets, masses of people in the gold mines near Kumasi become unemployed. When one job goes in a gold mine, six other jobs within the community disappear. We always said that if one job went in a coal mine here, two other jobs would go, but, given the nature of African society, the loss of one important job will lead to all sorts of other consequences for supply and services.

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank programmes insist that there should be privatisation, balanced budgets in third world nations and free trade, although free trade may destroy indigenous commercial developments and result in the need for protection. They are called structural adjustment programmes and are forced on Governments who, surprisingly, are often still dominated by parties that previously ran a one-party

command economy, as in Tanzania. Such programmes have been operated in extreme circumstances outside the control of those Governments, and are now being driven into other areas. We should be more careful about that.

Unlike Arthur Schopenhauer, we should not just throw up our hands in despair and horror, and say, "That is the nature of life and it is how things will be. One problem will be built on another." It is time for the politics of optimism. That has been shown by the Government's response to the Jubilee 2000 campaign on dealing with debt. At the very least, we need to consider ways of raising massive resources to tackle environmental, economic and social problems in the third world. Those nations should be allowed to facilitate their own development, unhindered by the problems that the more advanced section of the world has sometimes created for them.

The Government should seriously investigate the possibilities of the Tobin tax—I hope that they take that message from the debate and put the issue on the agenda. There is no ready-made solution, and we do not know all the ins and outs of how the tax would work. The principle is worthy of investigation and serious study, however, and our Government, in association with some of their partners around the world, should consider it fully. A lead should be given on accepting the tax and international agreements should be made to ensure its operation.

An increasingly wide range of commentators and politicians across the political spectrum argue that a relatively small tax of 0.25 per cent. on currency trading—the figure mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Maryhill—could dampen currency speculation and raise enormous revenues. If it dampened that speculation entirely it would obviously not raise those revenues, but we cannot realistically believe that it could achieve that. We are not ready to overcome speculation in the modern world, but let us draw on it for resources to help the poorer nations to whose destruction it contributes.

War on Want, which leads a campaign for the tax, estimates that even such a small tax would raise up to $250 billion a year. Those revenues could be used to tackle global poverty and environmental crises. Eradicating the worst forms of poverty in the world and providing basic health care, nutrition, education, water and sanitation would cost $80 billion a year. A further $125 billion a year could be used to address environmental problems. *The Guardian* has estimated that providing universal primary education would cost only £8 billion a year. We are committed to advancing basic educational provision throughout the world.

The implementation of the Tobin tax would not all be plain sailing. We would need an acceptable international organisation to distribute the resources. Some have mentioned the United Nations in that context. The IMF, despite its problems, is another possibility. We will need a universal regime to prevent traders from migrating elsewhere. There is the rub, however. Traders use sophisticated computer systems to prevent their partners from ratting on deals, and those procedures might be adapted to prevent tax evasion. Furthermore, 80 per cent. of the speculation is undertaken in seven countries, and most transactions take place in a few large institutions. Respectable banks and brokers' houses might not wish to buck a popular tax, which is seen as a tax on sin and undue speculation.

It is probably naive to believe that there could be total enforcement, but that is a problem with all taxes and laws. The most important issue faced by Tobin advocates is the resistance to it from international capital, and the need for an international political organisation to roll in the speculators. We should have the will to do those things and press for them. The Government should view Tobin's aim as a noble one, which can uplift and encourage younger generations to believe that a decent, honourable world can be built. Those of us fortunate enough to live in the richer parts of the world should play our full part in that.

Support for the Tobin tax has been growing in the past decade. There is an increasing ferment of support in France, with about 14,000 people signing up to a campaign in the past year and organising demonstrations. The Canadian Parliament and the Finnish Government back Tobin, as does the Socialist International, together with many MEPs, whose recent motion on Tobin in the European Parliament failed by just four votes. A French parliamentary committee is investigating Tobin and two of its members have come to the Commons to discuss the issues with me. I am pleased by those developments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Maryhill referred to early-day motion 312 on the Tobin tax, signed by 101 Members of Parliament from all political parties and none. Several ex-Ministers have also signed it. The Tobin tax is clearly understood and has much going for it in the Commons. I hope that we shall hear more about the campaign, which is being led by War on Want, just as we heard more and more about the Jubilee 2000 campaign.

The Tobin tax is not a panacea, but progressives should raise their sights and seriously consider the fact that it would kill two birds with one stone by curbing a certain amount of currency speculation and tackling global poverty and global warming. I hope that the Government will take a lead on this key issue, at least by pursuing a full investigation so that, in the concluding words of the early-day motion, they

> discuss the concept with its partners in international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, the IMF, G8 and the European Union with a view to drawing up an internationally co-ordinated and feasible tax regime for currency speculation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Maryhill said that she had received a parliamentary answer saying that the Government did not favour the tax because they feared that there would be massive evasion. When I took a delegation of MEPs and representatives from War on Want to meet the Economic Secretary, we heard another argument: that the Treasury is engaged in an alternative programme to tackle currency speculation. That is welcome, but it is mistaken to claim that the Tobin tax would cut across and destroy such alternative measures.

It is obvious that a lot of work would have to be done before there could be a Tobin tax and serious agreements would have to be reached. That is some way in the future. Although the Government's programme of tackling currency speculation is an important step, we all know that ways will be found around it, as ways will be found around Tobin. Tobin could block those

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avenues and be additional and complementary to the Government's intended measures, not in conflict with them.

I hope that the Minister will respond positively today, because this is one of the most worthwhile measures that the House can consider. We are talking about an improved international order and a world of greater prosperity and improved trade. That is obviously in our interests too. However, Tobin should be initiated not for those reasons, but to tackle the manifest problems in the third world and to prevent the increasing occurrence of such hideous scenes. Having taken the lead in tackling international debt, and with the Department for International Development's good record, the Government should be at the forefront of these measures.

10.31 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) for introducing this useful debate. The Tobin tax is in danger of becoming a bit of a mantra, so the arguments should be properly set out and debated. I have mixed feelings about it. I normally sign most of the early day motions that come from development lobbies, but I have not signed this one as I have genuine concerns about what it means. I am not sure that the tax is a good successor to the Jubilee 2000 campaign.

As the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) pointed out, Jubilee 2000 was a powerful movement. It brought together a strong moral purpose with a practical mechanism that everyone recognised: debt reduction and helping poor countries to revive growth through the Paris club and official aid write-offs. The new campaign is not in the same league. It is tantalising. We are talking about vast sums of money that could be mobilised, but the mechanism is illusive. I may be damning the proposal with faint praise, but I am concerned about the idea simply running without being properly thought through.

I have a little bit of background on this. I worked a few years ago with the world Commission on Global Governance, a body set up by the Secretary General of the UN. It appointed Ingvar Carlsson, who was then Prime Minister of Sweden, and Sonny Ramphal, who was the head of the Commonwealth, to bring together a group of people to look at how the multilateral system could be sustained and financed in the long term. One of the ideas that was thrown up was the Tobin tax. There was a great deal of enthusiasm for it initially, but as we began to rub up against the practical problems, the strongest conclusion that emerged was that it should be studied further. I am a little concerned that five years further down the track we are still at the same level of argument.

Mr. Barnes: How far are the views that the hon. Gentleman is expressing the views of the Liberal Democrat party? He is presumably here to speak on behalf of his party. I had understood that the Liberal Democrats were likely to take a lead on the Tobin tax and were coming out in favour of it, in line with the arguments that my hon. Friend the Member for Maryhill and I have presented.

Dr. Cable: I am speaking as my party's spokesman. We had a good debate on the issue as part of a wider discussion on the problem of globalisation at our conference a few months ago. The Tobin tax concept was on the agenda as being worth considering, but we do not advocate it as a hard-area policy. I do not want to be destructive or to knock it down, but I shall set out its practical problems, although if someone can show me how those problems can be overcome, I shall be happy to advocate the tax.

The first difficulty is the rationale of the proposal as it relates to the workings of the foreign exchange markets. Tobin's original proposal emerged from the confusion and chaos after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system and the collapse of the dollar in the early 1970s. It was necessary to find another, stable alternative to the exchange rate system that had operated for most of the post-war period. However, for most of the following quarter of a century we have staggered from one type of system to another, with many episodes of speculative capital damaging national economies: the history of the Asian crisis is one example.

The lesson from experience, after reflection on the history of the period, is that in a modern, globalised world where capital flows easily, only two types of system work. The first is irrevocably fixed exchange rates, such as those in the European monetary union, where there is no speculative capital, because there is nothing to speculate on. The advantage of that system is complete stability and predictability, because foreign exchange rates are not volatile. That is the future of the EMU.

The alternative is the other extreme: allowing currencies to fluctuate in the market, as the yen, the dollar, the euro and sterling do at present. For those currencies, a large liquid market for foreign exchange is an advantage. "Speculators" is a pejorative word, but those who buy and sell foreign exchange in such a market contribute to a stable environment in which speculators are not given a one-way bet, as they were when sterling was pegged, or in the Asian market.

The Liberal Democrats believe that there are serious problems with the sterling exchange rate, because sterling is seriously overvalued. It is not unstable; sterling is extremely stable compared with its main competitors. Speculators are not creating problems for sterling on a day-to-day basis. The problem must be tackled by considering Government policy, interest rates, intervention and so on.

Other countries are also worried that they will have insufficient currency if their currencies are driven up to unsustainable levels by what is misleadingly called the Tobin tax. Chile is often cited as an example of how a tax on the inflow of foreign exchange can have a beneficial effect. Chile intervened to stop inflows of capital; it is true that it imposed a tax, but it was a tax not on foreign exchange transactions as such, but on the inflow of capital, which is different. The Germans and the Swiss also imposed such a tax for a while, but they, too, had to abandon it because it could not operate within the system of exchange control freedom.

The fundamental practical problem is how to operate a Tobin tax, especially in OECD countries, when there are no exchange controls and traders are not required to record their business. There is thus no paper trail and no links connecting countries' central banks with foreign exchange transactions.

The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire made a brave attempt to describe how the settlement system could be used as a base for calculating the tax. I am not sure how that would work, because foreign exchange dealings, more than any other, are very mobile. If there is the slightest difficulty in the market, the transactions are simply moved to the Cayman islands, Luxembourg or somewhere else. Even if the Bank of England were somehow to get hold of and tax the transactions in London's foreign exchange markets, it is not clear how such a system could be made to stick. In the past few years, we have moved from paper-based trading to electronic trading, which is even more difficult to track, and even if one accepts that it is fundamentally undesirable for people to buy and sell foreign currency, it is difficult to understand how the system would work. Could somebody plausibly explain how it could be made to operate?

Mrs. Fyfe: I will not embark on a dissertation on precisely how the system would operate—no doubt to the hon. Gentleman's great relief. Does he accept that people with enormous expertise have believed for years that the tax can work and have argued for it? All that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire and I ask is that the proposals be given thorough consideration. Let us hear the arguments and not push them aside because they seem difficult. We should have a proper debate and examine the proposals made by people who are convinced that they will work.

Dr. Cable: Put like that, the hon. Lady's argument makes a lot of sense and we have much common ground. I, too, would like the proposals to be studied properly. The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire described a world in which settlement systems could be monitored and made subject to a sort of stamp duty. It would be interesting to find out whether that proposal could be described in practical terms and be shown to be operable in Britain in co-operation with other countries. I have no wish to slap down the idea of further research, because it is desirable. If that results from the hon. Lady's initiative, I shall be delighted.

My concluding comments support her arguments a little more. I accept one of her basic propositions, that people who make much income from foreign exchange should be taxed on it. However, there are different ways of taxing. The capital gains tax regime is meant to tax people on their large capital gains winnings from dealing in foreign exchange or from other activities. Equally, banks that make substantial profits should pay tax on their income. Those who have read the Cruickshank report will know that he defines excess profits in the banking system. Maybe that should be taxed additionally. I have no quarrel with the idea that income generated from foreign exchange business represents a taxable base, although that is not exclusive.

Mr. Barnes: I am not particularly opposed to the other avenues of taxation described, but is not the problem with that argument that capital gains tax and other taxes would be pulled in by each nation's Treasury? They would not create a pool of funds for international institutions to use, as the Tobin tax would.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman raises a valid point, and I will conclude on that issue. Clearly, additional resources are needed for development assistance and multilateral initiatives, which could include peacekeeping and policing the global commons, the oceans and the Antarctic, which are not the property of any country. However, the Tobin tax argument worries me, because it creates the impression that there are vast sums of money out there that can easily be captured for a global body, whereas it is very hard work for us to raise money for aid. I am strongly in favour of countries raising their levels of aid to match a figure such as the United Nations target. It would be desirable for some of that money—I would argue for a high percentage—to go towards general global initiatives from bodies such as the World Bank.

There is no shortcut round the hard political task of persuading people in rich countries that they should take such decisions and make painful trade-offs against other public expenditure. The Tobin tax debate gives the impression that there is an easy option—a vast sum of rent waiting to be collected—and a shortcut to avoid the political necessity of raising capital for aid, for which I would argue strongly.

Mrs. Fyfe: I am sorry to intervene again, but I am curious about the dismissal of the notion that there are vast sums of wealth out there. The hon. Gentleman may remember that I mentioned that the Hong Kong and Shanghai bank claimed, in 1997, that it was making £2.3 million profit each day from currency speculation. Those who benefit to such a huge extent are better able to pay towards the reduction of international debt and meeting UN targets than, for example, a Govan shipyard worker.

Dr. Cable: That may be true, but the Tobin tax is not necessarily the best way forward. If it is true that the Hong Kong and Shanghai bank is making vast profits, there is a way of taxing it. As a British bank, it will pay British corporation tax and its British shareholders will pay income tax on their dividends. Moreover, if, as the Cruickshank report says, British banks are making excess profits, a case exists for the Financial Secretary and his colleagues to find a way of taxing them. However, that is a different argument from that of the Tobin tax.

I accept the necessity for additional resources for worthy causes. Aid given through national aid budgets and multinational agencies is important and must be supported. Although it is a little further down the track and more difficult, an argument also exists for raising money for the United Nations system in a less precarious way than the current means of funding peacekeeping and other international agencies. One of the proposals that has been considered—like the clever way devised by the Treasury to auction mobile phone licences—is to derive a modest amount of income for the UN by auctioning licences for the geostationary orbit, for high-orbital televisions stations. Those fall outside national jurisdiction—they are a genuine global

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commons—and the income could be used for multilateral purposes. I do not know whether that is more practical than the Tobin tax, but such proposals could be used to realise income for international agencies such as the UN, the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation. I do not discount putting the Tobin tax into the pot of ideas and researching it seriously, but I am cautious about whether it is an easy option, or whether it is ready for a substantial campaigning initiative. We have not reached that stage. I apologise to the hon. Member for Maryhill if I seem to be damning her with faint praise. I agree with much of what lies behind her proposal, but the practicalities and some of the economic reasoning appear, at first sight, to be seriously flawed.

10.48 am

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) on securing a debate on this subject. It raises separate issues, which do not necessarily follow each other. One is whether developing economies should raise and direct more money for international aid, to relieve the economies and suffering of countries that are insufficiently developed economically. Other questions are whether a Tobin tax on exchange rate transactions would be effective in producing a more stable currency regime, whether it would have undesirable side effects and whether it is practical. The two parts of the argument do not hang together. If it were practical to levy such a tax, it would be necessary, as many people have pointed out, for each country in which the tax applied to agree that the revenue raised would be placed in an international pot. In the event of genuine differences, they could agree to using any tax revenue—even, perhaps, VAT. There is nothing magic about revenue on foreign exchange dealings.

Mr. Winterton—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The occupant of the Chair in Westminster Hall is called Mr. Deputy Speaker or Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Flight: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I declare an interest in that, in 1988, I wrote a book with the rather pompous title "All You Need to Know About Exchange Rates", which nevertheless sold 15,000 copies worldwide. It was a history of exchange rates, explaining how they operate under floating regimes. At business school 30 years ago, heralding the end of Bretton Woods, my major was on how businesses manage their exchange rate exposure. In 1980, I pioneered the concept of the managed currency fund for use by individual investors, which manages a basket of currencies much like a central bank manages its currencies.

To some extent, every Member of Parliament has an interest, in that we all have beneficial interests in the House of Commons pension scheme, which, like every other pension scheme, is a major activist in foreign exchange markets. Every time it buys or sells investments in other parts of the world, it enters into a foreign exchange transaction, as it does for every dividend that it receives on such investments.

The argument that 5 per cent. of such activity is trade and the rest is speculation is inaccurate. The great bulk of such activity arises from the fact that investments, whether they are United States, UK or Dutch pension funds, are now managed and invested internationally. Every activity associated with pools of financial assets that are managed internationally results in a foreign exchange transaction. That represents much of the activity in financial markets.

The standard argument against the Tobin tax that has been echoed by the Secretary of State for International Development and two recent Economic Secretaries to the Treasury, including the current one, is that it would not be practical. The broadly accepted points that follow from that argument are that such a tax would need to be global and to cover all instruments. I shall not repeat the arguments advanced by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) about the need for such a tax to be global, but covering all instruments would be tricky. In today's world of derivatives, it is easy to cover currency positions without buying currency or an instrument denominated in a foreign currency. That is a practical issue to which few people have given thought.

Tobin's proposals appeared following the end of the Bretton Woods era. Some people look back on the end of that era as a terrible event, but in fact its breakdown was inevitable. Bretton Woods was a crude system that worked okay after a major world war, when economies were essentially closed and relatively unsophisticated and undeveloped, but it could never have sustained what has happened since. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Twickenham said, all respectable economists have ultimately concluded that the only choice is between a currency bloc—such as the dollar bloc, which extends well beyond the United States, or the euro bloc—or freely floating exchange rates.

When people refer to the emotive subject of currency speculation and profits made by the Hong Kong and Shanghai bank, the biggest bank in the world, some misunderstanding is involved. Ultimately, there are no net winners. If someone makes money out of buying a currency that increases in value, someone else has lost. If everyone in the participating arena is included and costs to central banks are taken into account, there are no net winners resulting only from exchange rate movements. The banks' profits derive mainly from the margins—often small margins—that they add when they enter transactions with clients. That is not necessarily an argument against the tax, but the perception that pots of gold can be had from currency speculation around the world is not accurate. Some win and some lose, but the net effect is no winners through changes in exchange rates alone.

Mrs. Fyfe: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether he is in favour of the principle of taxing currency speculation if all the difficulties could be ironed out? Or does he wish to draw attention to numerous difficulties in order to prevent any such tax being levied?

Mr. Flight: I thank the hon. Lady for her point. I was about explain that I have more fundamental objections of principle to the tax proposals. It is perhaps a nice but impractical socialist idea that echoes back to Harold Wilson and the days of the gnomes of Zurich. Reading

between the lines, the Treasury has the same view. It may give polite reasons why it is not practical, but it does not believe in the idea.

I shall explain why I am uncomfortable in principle. The two objectives of Tobin were to make exchange rates more stable in order better to reflect economic fundamentals and to support the autonomy of nations in the running of their monetary and economic affairs. On the first issue, a Bank of England study on stamp duty arrived at the conclusion that the effect of a Tobin tax would be neutral. A US study further suggests that the larger the markets and the greater their liquidity, the better the stability. If a Tobin tax substantially reduced the volume of transactions, it could increase the scope for volatility.

Mr. Barnes: What does the hon. Gentleman think about the size of the Tobin tax? A tax of only 0.25 per cent. might not have the impact that he fears, or is he arguing that it is the thin end of the wedge—that once the tax is introduced, it will be increased later?

Mr. Flight: My point arising from the Bank of England study on stamp duty was that a marginal tax might have little or no impact. If there were a discernible impact, as a result of either a low tax level or subsequent increases, my point of principle was that reducing the volume of transactions—Tobin's objective—would not lead to greater currency stability.

I wish to deal with studies of the UK's membership of the exchange rate mechanism and of what happened in Asia. Before I do, let me repeat that the participants in foreign exchange transactions are not a limited number of rich individuals and banks who sit around gambling all day. They are mainly the huge volume of savings funds, pension funds, corporate moneys, companies covering their assets as well as their trade, and so forth. During the bounce back in Asia last year, Asian central bank reserves increased by about $80 billion over just a few months. As I said, there is an inaccurate conception of what the currency world is about.

Under floating exchange rate regimes, there is reasonable stability until something gets seriously out of line. That is when substantial speculative activity occurs. The change in the exchange rate is a steam valve that corrects things that have gone wrong economically. A classic example is 1992, when we were getting into a worsening recession because our membership of the ERM meant that we had to have rising interest rates when we needed falling interest rates. Germany needed higher interest rates because of the post-unification boom. Hon. Members will recollect that that was a painful period—businesses were going bust, people were losing their houses and so forth. On what some people describe as black Wednesday and others describe as white Wednesday, sterling broke out of that straitjacket as a result of massive speculation, bringing huge economic relief to this country. The economy recovered strongly from that day onwards, and we were rescued from something that was causing us grave economic damage.

In the wake of the Asian crisis, many fine development economists came up with theories suggesting that it was a tragedy that should not have happened and asking what we could have done about it. However, Asia has bounced back completely in the past two years, with growth rates of 8, 9 and 10 per cent. Like the UK, Asia got into an impossible position by having managed exchange rates and not allowing its currencies to float up and down according to economic pressures. In the early 1990s, the Asian economies should have allowed their currencies to strengthen to ward off overheating pressures, and in the mid-1990s they should have allowed markets to weaken their currencies. The mistake of trying to manage exchange rates led to participants in the Asian economies borrowing heavily and relatively cheaper in dollars, depositing the proceeds in their local currencies, making a large interest rate margin and believing that they could go on doing that for ever without trouble. Of course, that was nonsense. The banking, lending and Government systems were not on top of the situation, but the explosion that occurred is leading to a considerable correction of the problems. We no longer hear calls for a change in the system of floating exchange rates, because Asia has recovered. Good has come out of a crisis that happened, mechanistically, at a peak period of currency speculation.

The crucial issue is whether one wants to raise more taxes. There is potentially an argument for the Tobin tax as a source of raising tax. That would no doubt appeal to the Government, who have thought of many new ways of raising tax. It is also argued that, if the tax were modest, its impact might not be too detrimental to the effective working of currency markets. However, the big issue is whether this country and the world want to raise tax revenues in this area. As the hon. Member for Twickenham argued, and as Ministers have noted previously, the question is whether the proposal is practical and whether one could have a wholly global tax-raising system in the world of today's electronics.

Paper currencies are no more than the common stock of the economic areas—the countries—that they represent, and there is no more of an argument for taxing transactions in that asset than there is for other stocks. There is a good argument for taxing transactions in commodities, as commodity markets work in a similar way to exchange rate markets. That is also increasingly true of labour, especially highly skilled labour, which is a global commodity that buys and sells itself, not only through pay remuneration, but with transfer fees.

There is a point of principle—why tax one stock and not others? The closest comparison is with ordinary securities, for which stamp duty acts as a turnover tax. As the Minister will be aware, there is growing pressure to end United Kingdom stamp duty on security transactions, because they can be undertaken without stamp duty in other parts of the world, including Germany. The revenue will dwindle to nothing if stamp duty continues. I do not argue the case for or against stamp duty, but economic forces tend to be against measures such as stamp duty and withholding tax.

The concept has been debated on and off for nearly 30 years and has had support from time to time in the wake of exchange rate crises and from those who believe that economies should be controlled and managed by Government, so it is not new. It has not been taken up, largely because of its impracticalities. Moreover—this is my underlying point—why should we put a turnover tax on one commodity and not do so more widely? The

[Mr. Flight]

Government will argue that it would be nice, but it is impractical. There are much more effective ways for the United Kingdom's people and Government to assist the developing world. Currencies are a common stock; countries that have problems with their currencies have badly managed economies and bad systems of law and banking. We must do something about those fundamentals. Money will not help by itself. Pulling together to do more for developing economies is a decent and Christian cause, but it does not emerge out of the Tobin proposal. The Tobin tax runs the risk of spreading the illusion that there is a pot of gold of immoral speculative profits that can be tapped to answer the developing world's problems. The reality is not like that at all.

Mrs. Fyfe: We should not continue without remembering that the Conservative Government failed to match the United Nations target for aid and allowed our aid budget as a percentage of GDP to fall. Far from exploring what useful alternative there could be to a Tobin tax, they showed that they were not interested.

Mr. Flight: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment. A great deal was done in the voluntary sector during the years of Conservative Government. I am not aware that this Government's record has been significantly different. Encouraging the voluntary sector is the most effective method of helping to develop economies, but we are arguing not about party politics, but about the principles of the Tobin tax.

In conclusion, the Tobin tax would be unacceptable to the United States. Whatever we or Japan may think, unless the US changed its views, the tax could not become a practical reality.

11.10 am

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I shall be brief. I apologise for not having been here at the start of the debate. I was on a minor mercy mission—saw a dog locked in a car in the car park and thought I should find someone to open a window for it.

I agree with almost everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) said. The Tobin tax is almost certainly wholly unworkable. Even if it were not, it would be unattractive, because it is not clear that a reduction in the total amount of exchange rate flows would result in decreased exchange rate volatility; it might increase volatility. Many of the advocates of the tax also seem confused about whether they are seeking to create a tax base or to reduce exchange rate volatility.

The hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) spoke about aid flows. Aid is more or less irrelevant to the development of most of the third world. The key issue is total trade and investment flows. Investment flows have rocketed as a consequence of globalisation and huge parts of the third world have experienced massive increases in GDP per capita over the past 20 years on the back of those increased capital flows. That has had nothing to do with state aid or activity. That is not to say that I oppose an aid programme. I support one, but we should not think that such a programme has much to do with long-term economic development and prosperity. For most of the countries involved, it is at best peripheral. I even have sympathy with some points—others of their points are confused—made by the demonstrators who were waving banners against the World Bank in Washington this week.

The only point on which I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs is on exchange rates as a pressure valve. They are a pressure valve only in that they can absorb short-term asymmetric shocks. All too often, advocates of free floating argue for exchange rate adjustments that then become a substitute for more fundamental adjustments—in real factor prices rather than in nominal terms—in the real economy that should have taken place anyway.

Mr. Flight: My point was that exchange rate crises force adjustments as well as correct an incorrect exchange rate, but the forcing of adjustments is the important point.

Mr. Tyrie: They may force or they may delay adjustments. As we saw in the UK during the 1960s and under the Bretton Woods system, devaluations are often a substitute for real economy adjustments that would inevitably have to take place anyway.

I shall be interested to hear how much the Treasury deviates from the line predicted by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs that, although it may wring its hands a little, it is as opposed to the Tobin tax as the Opposition are.

11.14 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): It has been an interesting debate with several thoughtful contributions. I will do my best to emulate the high standard that we have heard.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) on securing the debate, which has allowed discussion of a subject that is currently of widespread public interest.

We are all aware of the damage caused by recent turmoil on the Asian markets, referred to in the characteristically well-informed contributions of the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). The scale of poverty in large parts of the world was tellingly described by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). It is no surprise that James Tobin's 1978 proposal has been the subject of such widespread new interest. We have been talking about it for 22 years, rather than the 30 years mentioned by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs, but it has certainly been around for a long time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire said, we have taken a lead in addressing world poverty. We have a markedly different record from that of the previous Conservative Government, to correct the point made by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs. The aid budget will rise by 28 per cent. in real terms over three years between last year and next year. We are now seen as a pace setter in

international development. I greatly welcome public debate of such matters, of which today's debate is an instance.

The turmoil in Asian markets highlighted some weaknesses in the global financial system. We share the aspiration for more stable capital markets, which are better placed to deliver the economic growth and development that so many nations are crying out for. The key question is how best to achieve that.

It has become fashionable to disparage globalisation. However, we should remember that the increased cross-border activities during the second half of the previous century—trade, capital flows and foreign direct investment—went hand in hand with rapid rises in global output and wealth. In the past 20 years, annual world trade rose from $2,000 billion to $5,500 billion a year, world foreign direct investment inflows rose from $55 billion to $640 billion and world GDP increased from $10,000 billion to $30,000 billion.

The benefits of globalisation cannot be ignored. What is disappointing is that they have not translated into sufficiently large falls in poverty. The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) was rather complacent on that point. The proportion of people in developing and transitional economies living in abject poverty has declined—and we should not forget that—but the falls have not been large enough. More needs to be done to ensure that the poorest benefit. I shall say more about that in a moment, but retreating from globalisation is not the answer. We need to make it work better, but it would be wrong to deny the poorest countries in the world the development opportunities from which we have benefited.

Globalisation has transformed the world economy. The relatively sheltered national economies from the Bretton Woods era are gone and have been replaced by a global marketplace. In the new economy, national Governments depend for investment funds on day-to-day confidence among international investors. Governments must therefore pursue consistent and credible policies that provide stability.

Faced with financial crises in 1998, the G7 countries took rapid international action. As G7 president, the UK took a leading role and we have started to put in place new, long-term disciplines to promote greater stability—a new framework of rules that meet the demands of the global marketplace. Over the past 18 months, we have worked hard in the G7 to reform the international financial architecture. My hon. Friend the Member for Maryhill asked me what we have done on that front, so let me outline progress in four key areas.

First, we have produced a framework of internationally agreed codes and standards to be implemented by all countries that participate in the international financial system. Secondly, there is global financial regulation to make the international and national bodies who are responsible for financial supervision work together more effectively. Thirdly, there is a new framework for crisis prevention and crisis resolution. Fourthly, there is a framework of new social principles allied to our initiatives for immediate debt reduction. I shall sketch out where we have reached on each of those four reforms, which should provide a backdrop for today's debate.

Those reforms will deliver the stability objective of the Tobin tax more effectively. First, the codes and standards will deliver transparency and accountability. By taking the right actions in their own jurisdictions, Governments can help to deliver financial stability at a global level, but they need to set out clear objectives and to put in place open and transparent procedures. That is crucial for investor confidence; without transparency or proper procedures, investors will not make the long-term investments that are needed. We are working internationally to put in place the surveillance machinery needed to monitor the implementation of those codes and standards and to ensure that they are effective.

Secondly, global financial markets require proper national supervision and the innovation of global financial regulation. The responsible national and international bodies must work together more effectively, so we propose to bring together the IMF, the World Bank and key regulatory authorities in a new permanent committee for global financial regulation, charged with delivering a stable financial system. The financial stability forum has now been established and has made a successful start on its work. In time it can become the world's early warning system for regional and global financial market risk.

Thirdly, the financial crises of the past two years were deep and protracted. Better mechanisms are needed to prevent and resolve crises, so we have developed a new approach, in which both the public and private sectors contribute to maintaining stability. At the summit in Cologne last June, the G7 agreed a new framework for private sector involvement in crisis resolution, which will shape private sector expectations of how crises will be handled in the future and guide policymakers' responses. We are working to ensure that that framework is implemented as soon as possible.

Sound economies also depend on welfare and social systems that build social cohesion and trust. The World Bank and the UN have been asked to develop principles of good practice in social policy, which will be used by the IMF and the World Bank to design adjustment programmes. They will ensure that the burden of adjustment is not placed on the poorest people in the world. Those programmes are not just for use in times of crisis; they will also be used in normal times to assist countries to put in place the strong social systems and mechanisms necessary to help the poorest people.

Fourthly, we are committed to reducing the debts of the poorest countries; the heavily indebted poor countries agreement reached in Cologne set out to cancel $100 billion of developing countries' debt. We are working for faster, wider, deeper debt relief. That is the reason for our initiative to give 100 per cent. debt relief to every country that qualifies under the HIPC initiative. The challenge now is to implement it. We remain at the forefront of efforts to persuade our international partners to meet the agreed targets and to go beyond the level of debt relief agreed to provide 100 per cent. relief on the commercial debts owed by HIPC countries.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): What is the attitude of the United States to international efforts? Is it co-operating?

Mr. Timms: There have been some encouraging developments on debt relief, not least President Clinton's announcement on the subject. There are good grounds for optimism about the United States in that respect.

Mrs. Fyfe: My hon. Friend listed measures that will improve stability. We are familiar with the debt relief steps taken by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer; everyone thinks that they are great. Does the Treasury object in principle to having a tax on currency speculation that could be used in beneficial ways as an addition to the existing funds, or does it think that a currency speculation tax would cut across those initiatives?

Mr. Timms: The Tobin tax has a twin objective: first, to promote stability—the measures that I set out address that objective—and, secondly, the fund-raising effect, which I shall explain. It is an interesting idea, but it has a number of serious likely or possible drawbacks. First, it could introduce serious economic distortions to the international financial system. International currency transactions bring huge economic benefits by facilitating trade and investment flows. Restricting currency exchanges through taxation could have quite serious economic side effects. It might endanger economic growth in some of the least well-off countries.

Some currency transactions undoubtedly reflect pure speculation and contribute to financial crises, but others help economic adjustment and market stability. Currency transactions, as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire put it, are not all sinful. They are not all speculative. A Tobin tax would not distinguish between the two. By slowing the adjustment of financial markets, the tax would slow recovery from a crisis. Artificially slowing market adjustments to genuine price shocks would have a higher economic cost than rapid adjustment.

Secondly, and perhaps more tellingly, it is not certain that a modest tax would have much effect in a crisis. It might hit routine, day-to-day transactions, but it is unlikely to prevent the high volume flows seen at times of crisis. As Oxfam's thoughtful paper from last May put it

> Economists are divided as to whether a currency transaction tax significantly reduces systemic instability in foreign exchange markets...the beneficial effect of the tax on its own should not be overstated.

There is a good argument, which has been advanced in this debate, that a Tobin tax might increase volatility by reducing liquidity. Liquid markets are more efficient and price transparent. That argument is borne out by what has happened in some emerging markets. Their transaction costs are already high compared with those in the City of London. It could be said that that amounts to a tax on capital flows, yet those are precisely the markets that have suffered from serious currency instability and capital flight.

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Mr. Timms: I do not think that I can give way in view of the short time that remains.

Thirdly, a Tobin tax would be practically impossible to implement effectively. That point has been well made in the debate. It is probably a show-stopping practical means for achieving what my hon. Friend seeks. The UK has been leading the fight against international tax evasion and avoidance. We have taken a number of important steps in that regard, but we simply do not live in a world where taxes can be set and enforced at an international level. Every country jealously guards economic sovereignty on tax. Are we ready to cede our authority over tax matters to an international body? I do not believe that we are.

Whatever we think about financial secrecy havens and offshore centres, we must acknowledge their existence. Most of them are sovereign nations exercising exactly the influence over their tax affairs that the House and the UK Government exercise over tax matters in the UK. No international mechanism—not the G7, the IMF or the UN—is in a position to secure the agreement of all the countries in the world, or even those with a significant financial centre, to impose a Tobin tax, but that would be required to make the tax workable.

Currencies can be traded anywhere. We know how quickly capital markets can move. Traders would simply move their activities to regimes without the tax, with the likely result that the market would become less well regulated. We currently host about a third of the world's currency transactions—worth $637 billion a day. If a tax were imposed on foreign currency traders, they would move their activities to somewhere with less regulation. Driving the markets offshore to poorly regulated centres would add to the instability of the financial system at the cost of substantial job losses in the UK. Even it were possible to achieve the universal agreement that would be needed, there would still be huge scope for avoidance.

A large body of academic study is available on the Tobin tax; some support the idea and others oppose it. No one has successfully answered the concerns that I have set out. We must draw policy conclusions in the context of the practical realities of our wider international financial responsibilities. There is no multilateral mechanism for establishing a tax, and little international appetite for it.

We are pleased that organisations such as War on Want and Oxfam are engaged in the international debate about how we can ensure the stability of the international financial system and how we channel resources to the poorest countries. As Oxfam has said, the more visionary the proposals for spending tax revenue, the harder it may be to gain political acceptance for the tax. The best strategy seems to be to promote the less controversial suggestions regarding use of revenue and try to increase the allocation to development over the longer term.

Police (Lancashire)

11.30 am

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing the debate to take place. I also thank the Minister for giving up his valuable time. I would have preferred not to have the debate today, but in the circumstances I had no choice other than to raise the subject of Chorley police station.

The relationship between Chorley police, the local authority and local groups has been good, and all parties working together have produced some good initiatives. It is disappointing that we will end up discussing the closure of the police station, or its possible closure between 12 midnight and 8 am, but we will deal with that later.

Good work has been done. A scheme was started in Anderton and Adlington to put in place new security arrangements at bungalows where old people live. That is important. Only last month, the Home Secretary visited the area and was impressed with the scheme. It has ensured that crime has fallen greatly, which was what we wanted.

It is also important that Chorley is receiving more closed circuit television money. Chorley was a pathfinder with its mobile CCTV unit, which has been the envy of many other areas. Many police authorities have visited the town to see it and it will certainly be copied. We can be proud that it came out of Chorley.

A major campaign is under way to ensure that Clayton village has a police station. The population of the village is 15,000, but there is no police station. That is another campaign that we have taken on board. The community groups and I have been discussing the matter with the police.

The decision of the police to close Chorley police station between 12 midnight and 8 am undermined all those new initiatives. The real problem is that there was no consultation. Earlier in the year, the police decided to close the custody suite at the police station. As the local Member of Parliament, I was not consulted. The local authority, the police forum and other groups that we thought would have been consulted, were not. That closure raised concerns about the future of the police station.

The divisional commander and the chief constable of Lancashire constabulary guaranteed that the police station was not under threat and that they would consult any relevant bodies in the future. That was crucial. The chief constable sent a letter to the local authority on 11 February stating that the policy station would not close.

The decision to close the station was taken with no consultation, no notice and no warning to the local authority or myself, as the Member of Parliament. In fact, the local press stumbled on the note outlining the decision to close Chorley policy station. At 5.30 pm last Tuesday, I received a telephone call from the local press who said that they would respect my comments and asked for my view on the closure of the police station between 12 midnight and 8 am. I was absolutely flabbergasted; I had no inkling whatever about the decision. After everything that we had achieved by working well together, I was disappointed that that decision was taken with total disregard for everyone else.

The claim is that the station was closed for only one night, but it is the fact that it closed without any consultation that is important. Lancashire police authority's policing plan outlines the corporate strategy. The key part concerns partnerships. Lancashire constabulary prides itself on consulting local representatives, the police and community forum and community groups. Clearly, it did not do so, which has caused the problems. How could it have made such a decision without consulting or even informing relevant groups? That is the major worry. Budgets may be devolved and the local inspector may be allowed to take decisions, but such a lack of communication is unacceptable. It is not the way forward and it is not the way to run the police in a modern society. To go forward, we should work in partnership. Concerns will be raised if current practice continues.

Inspector White said that the closure was on health and safety grounds and was to protect police officers. If the police inside the station must be protected, what about the public outside, who need the police? In London, thugs pursued an Asian gentleman, who had to lock himself in a mobile toilet, where he then used his mobile phone to summon the police. People could be running down the street to the police station, only to find that they cannot enter because the doors are locked. They would then have to pick up the mysterious phone. Who would answer? At present, Chorley police answer, but soon calls will be re-routed to Hutton. That is centralisation, because the headquarters of the Lancashire police are in Hutton.

People must man those phones. Could there be 10 phones, but only five people to answer them? What would happen if all 10 phones rang at the same time? If there were one person per phone, why could one person not be put in Chorley police station? That would be more beneficial. The plan is not good politics or good policing and it could make people who have been able for many years to enter the police station, and who have always thought that a police station of that size would be open 24 hours a day, more vulnerable. We must reinstate such provision. It is important to remember the purpose of the police station.

Inspector White should reconsider his comments, because people feel more vulnerable when they believe that the police must be protected within their own police station. He has sent out the wrong messages. The closure of the police station is a worry, because Chorley is unique. It is not a little town centre, but a big area of 80 square miles. Chorley has a population of more than 100,000 and 27 parish districts surround its centre. It should have a 24-hour police station, because it is no ordinary district. It is a large, varied area that goes from the moors and the hills to the plain of Lancashire. A 24-hour police station is the least that we should ensure for the good people of Chorley.

As centralisation and the movement towards Hutton continue, we must consider the fact that Chorley is on a county boundary. Greater Manchester police force operate on one side, but they will not work in Lancashire, so we can only go further north or west for services. There is no access across the Pennines and Greater Manchester police cover the south. It is important to recognise that the police stations that will back up Chorley are some distance and I know that the Minister will take on board that important matter.

[Mr. Lindsay Hoyle]

Centralisation and the fact that we were not consulted or informed before the station started to close its doors have caused problems and worry.

The response times to criminal activity in Chorley will increase because of the need to travel further, which will also raise costs. There are more arrests in Chorley than South Ribble, yet all the people arrested in Chorley are booked in South Ribble. That takes up more police time. It has now been recognised that the custody suite in Chorley may have to be opened at weekends, because Chorley is a busy town. People from all around visit it, and that means disturbances. Taking those people to a much quieter place is not feasible, especially if numbers cannot be catered for when custody suites are needed at the weekend. The plan needs to be re-jigged and reconsidered. Nothing more should happen before consultation. Public perception will be bad, as the closure sends out all the wrong signals about crime and the future of the police station.

People suffer not merely from crime, but from fear of crime. Their fear will continue if they believe that the doors are locked and that sometimes no police officers will be in the station. It is another big worry when the police are called out and no one is left in the station. It is crucial to ensure more police resources in Chorley.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The hon. Gentleman mentioned resources. Does he agree that the problem in Chorley reflects wider resource pressures on the Lancashire police force? It also reflects the fact that 6.6 per cent. of the Lancashire police are either ill or on light duties. Pressures on resources and manpower are also manifested in the Ingol ward of my constituency, which cannot sustain more than one community beat officer. That relates to the hon. Gentleman's theme of the fear of crime.

Mr. Hoyle: I agree that there is a problem in Lancashire. Police numbers are down and too much time is lost through sickness. It is important to deal with that. Police resources are undoubtedly a major concern for many Lancashire people. I recognise that the Government have taken that into account and intend to deal with funding issues.

I shall provide some statistics. Public satisfaction about the perceived level of foot patrols in Lancashire fell from 19 per cent. in 1997-98 to 14 per cent. in 1998-99. Satisfaction with perceived mobile patrols during the same period fell from 53 per cent. to 42 per cent. Closure of police stations during the night will not improve public perception. It will only add to people's worries. Public confidence is crucial to good policing.

Another key objective of the Lancashire constabulary's strategy is to maintain satisfaction among commuter groups and the public, but that is not being achieved. I have with me a copy of the *Chorley Guardian,* with the headline, "Locked Out". It is right for the local paper to draw attention to the public's anxieties. The article states:

> Insp White also admitted that when the planned move of the station's communications room to police HQ in Hutton takes place later this year, calls from the phone at the bottom of the station steps will be routed through there rather than into the Chorley station.

People dashing to a phone may find that their calls will not be answered because so many calls are coming in from all over Lancashire. If that is allowed to continue, there is a real danger of this policy being copied elsewhere.

The Minister must answer some key questions. Are further resources available to ensure that Chorley has a 24-hour police station? Can resources be directed differently to keep the police station open? What pressure can the Minister apply on Lancashire constabulary to keep the police station open full time? That is what the people of Chorley expect and what they deserve. Will the Minister ensure that Lancashire constabulary consults local representatives and other relevant bodies before taking such important decisions in future? Will he initiate a review of the role of police authorities in response to recent events, because the police are taking decisions that affect thousands of people without giving them the elementary courtesy of informing, let alone consulting, them?

The local newspaper in Chorley discovered what was happening out of the blue when someone left a notice on the board saying that the police station was to be closed between 12 midnight and 8 am. No one knew about it, no one was advised about it and no one was consulted on it. That is not the way forward; it is through partnership and consultation. We must urgently deal with the fact that Chorley was denied any partnership or consultation.

The situation may have changed a little, as the Home Office has phoned up responsible individuals. Some people may rightly be jumping about, demanding to know who took such a decision and how it could have happened. The point is that it did happen. The Minister may have received some flannel from police HQ and may have been told that it was a one-off problem resulting from staffing on a particular night and that the station was not closing. However, the inspector admitted in black and white that it was closing. If nothing else, the fact that we are having the debate today has ensured that our police station will remain open for the near future to allow consultation to take place. The bottom line, however, is that the measure was going to be sneaked through under the door without anyone knowing about it—that is the crucial point.

Reports on the knock-on effect may be filed away somewhere. I know that reports are not good in other areas in which they have lost their 24-hour police stations. People may say that only one person a night visits the station and that person may only be a drunk. If we consider only that small statistic over a short period, we do not take into account what happens the year round and what will happen. Chorley has a growing population—a new town has been built in the region and before long there will be a new village with 2,000 houses. The area is growing, not declining.

The closure took place without consultation and we must keep the station open in the future. New licensing laws may be introduced—there may be a 24-hour alcohol licence. We will not be able to close the police station at midnight, because everyone will not be put out into the town centre at 11 o'clock. Far from it, there will be a busy time around 1.30 am to 2 am or 2.30 am, when people may cause trouble. A handbag or a car may be stolen, or someone may be attacked, but when the victims go to the police station they will find that huge,

eight-storey building in the town centre closed. With the changes in the licensing laws and patterns of behaviour in town centres, people should feel that the 24-hour station is a refuge to which they can go if they have a problem.

Civilian staff have always worked at the station, but that has suddenly become a health and safety problem. Why is it supposed to be a problem only from midnight to 8 am? Surely, if there is a problem, it must be for 24 hours a day?

Let us be honest: such closures are not good policing. I look forward to the Minister's speech because I am sure that he will take on board my arguments and will recognise that the people of Chorley are important.

11.47 am

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) on obtaining the debate on police funding in Lancashire as a whole and in Chorley in particular. He has already achieved part of his ambition by ensuring that the subject receives local and national airing.

Let me set the context for the debate. The House debated and approved the Government's proposals for police funding for 2000-01 on 3 February 2000. Under those proposals, Lancashire constabulary's Government-supported funding for that year will be £185.3 million, an increase of 4 per cent., which represents an extra £7 million over the previous year—that 4 per cent. contrasts with the national average of 2.8 per cent. Lancashire police authority has set a budget of £189.6 million, with a 4.6 per cent. increase in net revenue spending. The south Lancashire devolved budget is £26.7 million, which means an increase of 12.7 per cent in that region in the past year. Those figures contrast with an average of 4 per cent. for England and Wales as a whole.

Lancashire is, therefore, a relatively well-funded force. Audit Commission figures published in March show that the force spends nearly £121 a year per person, compared with a national average of £118. As the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said, there are fewer police officers in Lancashire than there were when the Government took office in 1997. In September 1999, there were 3,221 police officers—27 fewer than there were in March 1997. I should set that figure in context, however, as in contrast to that reduction, in the same period the number of civilian support staff employed by Lancashire constabulary increased by 90.

As the House will understand, many of those extra civilians will undertake operational support jobs that were once the preserve of police officers such as scenes-of-crime officers. Their recruitment makes it possible for the operational front line to be maintained. It is a means of ensuring that best value is obtained from the available resources and that police officers do the jobs that we expect of them—patrolling our streets and working towards the reduction of crime.

On police numbers, I remind the House that in September my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced a new crime fighting fund, which will be used to recruit 5,000 police officers over and above the number that forces would otherwise have recruited in the three years from April 2000. About a month ago, on 27 March, my right hon. Friend announced how the £285 million that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor provided in this year's Budget was intended to be used. The first deployment of that money will be to enhance the crime fighting fund, which will be brought forward to deliver those 5,000 officers in two years rather than three, and at least to double the number to be recruited in the first year. In the next two years, Lancashire constabulary will receive sufficient funding from the crime fighting fund to enable the recruitment of 126 extra police officers over and above the number that the force would otherwise have recruited.

It is important to pay tribute to the work of Lancashire constabulary, the chief constable and her force. They have made impressive inroads in the reduction of crime. In the 12 months to September 1999, crime fell by 10.8 per cent. That is a substantial achievement. It is the biggest single reduction in crime achieved by any force in the country. From the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley is acknowledging my remarks, I know that he would want to join in that tribute.

I gather from the Lancashire policing plan for this year that the crime rate in Chorley is about half that recorded in some other local authority areas, making south Lancashire statistically one of the safest places to live in the country. I also gather that the priority anxieties in Chorley include drug and alcohol misuse, personal safety, fear of crime—to which my hon. Friend referred—vehicle crime and road safety. All those anxieties are significant, but they have been prioritised on the basis of generally good crime figures compared with the rest of the country and, indeed, the rest of the county.

My hon. Friend mentioned partnership, which is the core of the Government's approach in such matters. It is important to acknowledge, as he did, that partnerships can mobilise community resources at every level to prevent and reduce crime and the impact of offending. I understand that my hon. Friend was instrumental in the partnership between the police and Chorley borough council's housing department, which targeted vulnerable sheltered housing in the Anderton and Adlington areas. More than £90,000 of local authority money was used to improve security. I am told that that partnership has been a great success, with no reported crime since the works were carried out, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for that work.

I also understand that Chorley borough council has for some time led the way locally in developing CCTV systems, to which my hon. Friend referred. The Government have awarded £2.4 million to 11 CCTV systems in Lancashire, including a £271,000 scheme for Chorley town centre car parks, and £120,000 for a mobile system covering urban and rural areas in Wyre.

The key point, and the core of my hon. Friend's speech, is the future of Chorley police station. I hope that he will not mind my explaining the general context because it is important to set the decision in the overall context of the force.

My hon. Friend was clear about consultation. I acknowledge that and will deal with some of his arguments. I assure him that he will not get any flannel from me on the matter. It is for the chief constable, Mrs. Clare, to decide, and ultimately she must take operational responsibility.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

The chief constable informs me that she has no intention of closing Chorley station and wants that explicitly on record. I gather that the station is part way through a £300,000 refurbishment programme, which it would obviously not be if the intention were to close it. However, my hon. Friend is right to mention proposed changes in the use of the station. As he said, the new police service radio communication system, PSRCP, will be based at police headquarters and, as he knows, Lancashire will be one of the first forces in the country to use it. The communications room at Chorley will therefore be closed. It is important to emphasise that the migration of the communications system to the force headquarters will have no effect on the operation at or the policing of Chorley. The purpose of PSRCP is to increase police activity in the area being policed, instead of officers having to remain in the police station.

The migration of the communications rooms at Chorley and other police stations to the Lancashire force headquarters will reduce the staff available to reinforce custody suites at short notice. Therefore, for the health and safety reasons of short notice that my hon. Friend gave, the force advises me that it has had to reconsider the number and location of custody suites in the force area. As a result, Chorley custody suite was closed on 1 April and Leyland police station became the main custody facility for the southern division of the Lancashire force. The chief constable stated her belief that those changes would not affect the policing of Chorley. However, I understand why my hon. Friend makes his points and shall respond accordingly.

The chief constable has informed me that she is considering the possibility of ending the current 24-hour status of Chorley police station. That is a matter for Mrs. Clare and the police authority.

Mr. Hoyle: Is the Minister aware that the chairman of the police authority did not know that the decision had been taken?

Mr. Clarke: I was not aware of that. My hon. Friend has put the matter on the record.

I was informed that the reason for the chief constable's decision is that surveys conducted by the Lancashire police have found that, on average, only one person visits police stations between midnight and 6 am. It is maintained that closing the station to public access does not affect the policing of Chorley precisely because of the availability of modern telecommunications. By ensuring that police are on the beat instead of in police stations, new telecommunications systems will result in a higher police profile. The chief constable has reached a decision on the basis of the limited need for public access late at night, which is why she is considering Chorley's future as a 24-hour station. She proposes to reduce its hours of business when the radio communications facility moves to headquarters. I should emphasise that she intends to consult the local community on the process before making a final decision. My hon. Friend—and his local paper—can therefore take some satisfaction that, in raising this issue in this Chamber and more widely, he has secured part of his ambition to ensure proper consultation on the matter before a final decision. However, I reiterate that, ultimately, it is an operational decision for the chief constable. That is the fact.

My hon. Friend also referred to whether restricted hours for Chorley police station would affect the force's involvement with partnership. The chief constable has asked me to inform this Chamber that there is no question of the police's commitment to the Chorley partnership being inhibited by such decisions. That is an important point.

I have answered a number of my hon. Friend's questions about consultation. He also raised the important issue of response times, with which police are wrestling throughout the country. Call centre systems are becoming more efficient at dealing with incoming calls, instead of a whole range of local calls in different circumstances. The purpose is to reduce rather than increase response times. I do not have the figures for Lancashire, but I can assure my hon. Friend that he should not be worried on that score.

On further resources, I cannot help my hon. Friend with his request. As I said, the Lancashire force is relatively well resourced in comparison with other forces and that is an operational matter for the chief constable. I know that the hon. Gentleman will discuss his concerns with her.

This has been a useful debate, which has raised several important issues. I emphasise that Lancashire is being well policed and that crime is falling.

Assisted Areas Map

12 noon

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): The Berwick and Berwickshire areas received a bitter blow just over a week ago. As is often the way these days, we read the news in a newspaper on Monday morning, in advance of an announcement made in the House on Monday afternoon giving further details, that we were to be excluded from the assisted areas map. As speculation had suggested, the Berwick town wards of Edward, Elizabeth, Shieldfield, Seton, Spittal and Tower were excluded, with the rural wards of Belford and Beadnell, and the Islandshire ward, which includes rural and urban areas. A total population of about 17,000 was removed from the list of areas eligible for tier 2 status. In adjoining Berwickshire, the ward areas of Burnmouth, Foulden and Hutton, Eccles and Leitholm, and Edrom, Swinton and Whitsome were also dropped from the tier 2 map. Those areas, on two sides of the national boundary, are clearly connected—many people travel to work across the boundary.

We were pleased to be included in the draft map when it was published last year and assumed that we had been included because of the problems caused by the loss of more than 250 jobs with the closure of the Pringles textile factory. A total of more than 800 jobs have been lost from the town's textile industry since 1996. The over-reliance on the textile industry was acknowledged by the establishment of the Berwick task force, with the encouragement and participation of the Department of Trade and Industry. Berwick was also included in the last months of the European Retex programme, but that gave time only for studies and programmes to be prepared rather than for regeneration work.

The proposals of the Northumberland Strategic Partnership for assisted area status for Northumberland noted that

> 20 per cent. of the workforce in Berwick on Tweed borough were employed in manufacturing in 1996... unemployment in Berwick shows a strong seasonal pattern... Berwick is a strategic site, being capable of attracting substantial inward investment.

Regional selective assistance is the main instrument of the Government's regional industrial policy. It is designed to create and safeguard jobs, to attract and retain mobile investment and to improve the competitiveness of disadvantaged areas. However, regional selective assistance is the key factor that is lost by removal from tier 2 status. The wards that are being removed include those that contain sites where just such selective assistance could be used—sites such as large factories, where substantial opportunities for promoting employment can be pursued.

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): I offer the right hon. Gentleman my sympathy for the plight in which his constituency finds itself. I have an analogous problem in my constituency, where one ward that forms half of a new deal for communities pathfinder because it is in the top 5 per cent. of the local deprivation index and includes industrial sites capable of modernisation—where tier 2 status can be used to promote significant employment—has been replaced by a town centre ward that is so heavily developed with houses that not even a garden shed could be added to it. One could not possibly spend the money there. I am frustrated and puzzled. Does the right hon. Gentleman have an idea of what is going on?

Mr. Beith: I hope that the Minister recognises that that problem was brought about by the changes in the map. In several places, the very wards in which industrial development could take place have been taken out, while those in which it could not conceivably take place have been put in. That is the situation in Northumberland and other parts of the country.

Let us consider the index of deprivation, which includes factors such as unemployment and economic activity. There are 119 wards in Northumberland and three of the excluded wards—Edward, Tower and Spittal—are in the worst fifth. However, wards much lower down the index of deprivation have been added to the list.

One of the list's eligibility criteria is that areas should be "compact and contiguous". Berwick and the adjoining Berwickshire wards are, indeed, compact and contiguous and they contain the employment sites and the people who would benefit from the opportunities created by regional assistance. About 87 per cent. of people in the Berwick area who travel to work do so within the Berwick borough. That is a fairly unusual figure and it is far higher than elsewhere. Cross-border travel is primarily from the immediately neighbouring area of Berwickshire, which is represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood). The area is, of course, isolated—that is part of its problem, not a reason for denying it the help that it needs.

The unemployment rate in Berwick town is 7.1 per cent., which is up from 5.7 per cent. in 1998. In some wards, it is dreadfully high—9.4 per cent. in Seton ward and 7.3 per cent in Elizabeth and Spittal wards. Those figures are well above even the north-east average of 6.8 per cent., let alone the UK average of 4.6 per cent. Two hundred and fifty jobs were lost at Pringles in 1998-99 and 50 jobs were lost at Libris Computing and other firms. Northumberland as a whole is unable to keep up with the job losses and more than 2,000 jobs have been lost, while only 800 have been gained.

Manufacturing accounted for 20 per cent. of the employment sector in Berwick in 1996. About 93 per cent. of women employed in manufacturing work full time. Equally, 16 per cent. of all the unemployed in Berwick were plant and machine operators—the largest group among the unemployed. However, the rate for the creation of new firms is well below national figures—6.09 per cent. as opposed to 8 per cent. for Northumberland and 11.6 per cent. for England.

We could also consider the decline of VAT-registered businesses in Berwick. The number dropped by 6.5 per cent. in 1994-97. The figures for vacant premises show that 23 per cent. of Berwick's industrial premises were vacant in 1998. The economic activity rate is in the lowest quarter for all English regions.

Let us, however, consider the future. The prospect of tier 2 status in July 1999, when the map was first published, led at least three local companies to draw up plans, which would have meant approximately 100 new jobs. Those proposals will not now be eligible for the reduced rate of assistance through tier 3 enterprise

[Mr. Beith]

grants and are in jeopardy because of the revisions to the map. They were at the heart of the work of the regeneration task force. When a comparison is made with the incentives available in other areas, exclusion from tier 2 will weaken the case for relocating firms to Berwick. We have a single regeneration budget programme, but it cannot deliver enhanced competitiveness by itself. There will be a significant negative impact on the programme, which does not have the resources to deal with it.

I have concentrated on the problem in the Berwick town wards, where the major industrial expansion can take place. However, there are also problems in some rural areas. Seahouses, which has its own small industrial estate, has been excluded from the beginning. The Minister wrote to me on 11 August, before last week's announcement, to say that the Seahouses case could be re-examined if the map had to be reconsidered. Nevertheless, Seahouses has been left off the map and the community does not have access to the help that it needs.

In 1999, a harbour regeneration study called for extra funds to be targeted at the infrastructure of the harbour, which lies at the heart of the village's economic viability. In March, the harbour was refused a single regeneration budget grant. Now assisted area status is denied. A pile of reports and studies keeps showing the need for help, but not the means for its delivery.

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North-East): I understand the right hon. Gentleman's natural disappointment, but does he accept that my right hon. Friend the Minister had to do a difficult job as best he could? A reduction was required. The right hon. Gentleman may know that my constituency did rather well out of the redrawing. There will inevitably be some winners and losers. Is that not one of the points of a review?

Mr. Beith: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's constituents will be pleased by that news, but I would like him to come to Seahouses to explain to a community that is desperately in need of such help why it should be denied to it. I appreciate the Minister's difficult task, but suggest that he could have handled the matter differently.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) *rose—*

Mr. Beith: I must limit the interventions that I allow, or I shall not be able to give the case that my constituency needs presented.

The Belford area became nationally famous a week or so ago with the closure of a Barclays bank. That community is engaged in active regeneration projects and has been dropped from the map this time round. I would like the Minister to suggest whether the third tier of assistance—more limited assistance for small and medium-sized firms—will be made readily available to those more rural communities. If it is not, I do not see how they can achieve the needed regeneration. That tier of assistance may be available on only a limited scale. The funds may not go round all the areas now dropped from the map and would not support the relevant industrial projects in Berwick.

I shall suggest some ways in which the Minister can consider the matter in the remaining consultation period. I am puzzled that the Government have not appealed against the refusal of the map that they first proposed. That may be because of the time—probably about six months—that it would take to appeal. The process itself will also take some time. The original proposals were subject to extensive consultation, involving more than 350 responses and 40 meetings throughout the country. When the Government proposed the original map, surely they were satisfied that it met the European Commission's guidelines and the local circumstances, so far as possible, on the basis of the consultation. Now the map is completely different. Some areas have been removed and others have been added that have not been subject to such consultation. Would it not have been better to have appealed against the European Commission's objections to the original map, as the Government had the power to do?

The Government's first proposals did not include the limit to populations of 100,000. Areas with populations of less than that figure could be included, with the penalty that they would be counted as having populations of 100,000 for the purposes of the overall figure. It is worrying that the Commission seems to be moving the goalposts. If its doing so excludes the Berwick area, the Government must deal with that.

If the Commission insists that the areas must have a population of 100,000, the logical consequence is to put all the border areas hit by the decline of the textile industry together and treat them as a single area. As the Minister knows, that decline has spread across the borders. What consultation has there been with Scottish Departments and those with responsibilities in Scotland about the implications? Berwick is part of a border economy more than a north-east economy, so it would have been logical to have joined it to the chain of wards that has been affected by the devastating decline in the textile industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire will refer more to the matter in a moment.

There are two more weeks of consultation and the Minister will receive representations. In my view, a disastrous mistake has been made in an area in which the Department of Trade and Industry recognised that a task force and regeneration programme had to be implemented because there was a serious problem. If Ministers are serious about the regeneration of the Berwick economy, they cannot deny it the regional assistance that I described. I therefore plead with the Minister to restore the Berwick area to the map when the consultation period ends in two weeks' time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) has sought the permission of the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, the Minister and I to take part in the debate. I call the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire.

12.15 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am pleased to be able to make a brief contribution to the debate. I am pleased, too, to support the eloquent and telling case made by my right hon. Friend the Member

for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). He is absolutely right to say that throughout my parliamentary career he has been telling me that there is no national boundary between the economies of north Northumberland and the coastal communities and those further west, north of the border in Scotland. There is much social intercourse between the areas and many people travel to work across the national boundary—facts of which the administrative proposals take no cognisance whatever.

My right hon. Friend is also right to say that there is anger and confusion about the changes to the July 1999 map. The amendments are severely deleterious and prejudicial to the community served by Berwickshire and the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed. The area was recognised recently by the Scottish Office as a regional economy in dire need of special assistance. Indeed, a ministerial working party was set up to make cogent proposals to tackle some of the issues. If the amdts to the map are implemented, they will severely damage any prospect of development in places where there are real opportunities for doing so. My right hon. Friend is right to underscore that point.

The towns in Berwickshire in my constituency that will be particularly prejudiced are Eyemouth, especially the Gunsgreen industrial estate, and Chirnside, where there are substantial manufacturing employment opportunities. Further west, the electronics industries in wards 7, 11, 12 and 16 would benefit from significant and sustained future development. As my right hon. Friend said, in all those areas projects are in the pipeline—they were encouraged, worked out and are ready to go. The amendments to the map will put the kibosh on them and render the projects nugatory.

Competition is an important issue. As my right hon. Friend said, if Berwickshire is not eligible, firms there will suffer severely from competition from companies in other parts of the United Kingdom that are eligible for area aid.

I hope that the Minister will accept my right hon. Friend's offer of serious consultation with his colleagues north of the border to bring some coherence and sense to the proposals. I endorse my right hon. Friend's plea that the deletion from the map of the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed and its surrounding areas and areas in Berwickshire should be urgently and seriously reconsidered. Account must be taken of the long-term future and prosperity of the entire area.

12.19 pm

The Minister of State for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): I have listened carefully to what has been said and will take it into consideration in the consultation period, which ends on 2 May. If right hon. and hon. Members want to submit further evidence, we shall consider it.

I commend the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) for the force with which he put his case. I know that he feels strongly about the matter. I am sure that he appreciates that in July last year, when the Government submitted the original proposals for the assisted areas and the structural funds objective 2, we recognised the needs of that area. Indeed, I know that the right hon. Gentleman and the people of Berwick are disappointed that we have not been able to deliver what we put forward in the July proposals. We listened carefully to the views of the local and regional partners and that included the regional development agency. We also worked closely with the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales.

We found it hard to maintain the July proposals in our negotiations with the Commission. Indeed, the amendments that we announced last week were solely to meet the Commission's concern about those proposals and not because we do not recognise the case that has been put forward today. As the right hon. Gentleman appreciates, the British Government do not have a free hand. Under the EC treaty the Commission has sole competence in this area. We cannot pay any regional state aid without an assisted area map approved by the Commission. We have, therefore, been faced with some hard choices.

Mr. Cash: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Caborn: No, I had better reply to the outstanding questions first.

Mr. Cash: Could the Minister just confirm that it is not simply a question of wanting another place to be given assisted area status? There are circumstances in which people, such as those in my Grindley lane investment area, would want themselves to be taken out, having examined the structure plan.

Mr. Caborn: I am coming to that matter. I am just explaining how the maps are drawn up.

We were first faced with hard choices because of the criteria that were applied much more stringently by the Commission. We could either make the changes to meet the Commission's concern about the July map or, as the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed said, we could take that challenge. We are trying to get clearance for these maps before the summer. That would then backdate to 1 January when a number of indicative offers were made to people who have made applications that we cannot pay.

Some of the Government's indicative offers have gone through the due procedure for regional selective assistance; others have not. If we delayed and went through the procedures of article 88(2) of the treaty the process would go on for at least another six months and the outcome would be doubtful. We therefore decided to submit the revised map to the Commission. We made those amendments to ensure that 16.5 million people who will be covered by the new assisted areas are not disadvantaged.

We have made two principal changes: we have had to reduce the population covered by our proposals by a third of a million people and we have had to show that the areas proposed are more compact and self contained. Both of those changes have had an impact on our proposals for Berwick and Berwickshire, but we could not simply extend coverage up the coast to Berwick-upon-Tweed and across the Scottish border into Berwickshire, as we did in the July proposals. The areas proposed in July were not sufficiently compact to secure the Commission's approval. Under the new constraints that the Commission has imposed, we would have had to include much of Northumberland to ensure coverage of Berwick, and most of the Scottish borders to

[Mr. Caborn]

include Berwickshire. That approach would have been expensive in terms of population and would have had to be taken for other parts of the UK.

Overall, the coverage of the north-east has increased by 10 per cent. on the July proposals and a further increase to allow the coverage of Berwick-upon-Tweed could not have been accommodated within the overall reduction in population coverage imposed by the Commission. The alternative would have been to exclude another area of the north-east to allow the inclusion of Berwick-upon-Tweed. Similarly, within Scotland, the inclusion of Berwickshire as part of the wider Scottish borders area could have been achieved only at the expense of other areas.

The Government are conscious of the needs and concerns of the people of Berwick and Berwickshire and I stress that the assisted areas are but one part of a package of measures that the Government have put in place to meet regional needs and tackle the problems of Britain's most needy areas.

We inherited an uncoordinated and disjointed set of regional bodies with no overall strategy to bring together regional activities and we have tackled that problem. With devolution in Scotland and Wales and the establishment of the regional development agencies in England, we have put in place a framework to ensure that all parts of Britain share in our future prosperity.

The regional economic strategies that the RDAs produced last October are a significant milestone and provide the basis for promoting development and competitiveness in the regions. The Government are working with the RDAs to ensure that those strategies are delivered. Indeed, we are committed to delivering an integrated package of support for the regions to tackle poverty and unemployment and to support regional developments. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the Budget introduced a £100 million regional venture capital fund to help to finance small and medium-sized companies, a £60 million package to help small firms to get online, a new £50 million regional innovation fund to provide support for business clusters and incubators and an enterprise grant to offer assistance to small and medium-sized enterprises.

The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that £3.4 million from the Northumberland strategic partnership's award of £15.6 million under single regeneration budget round 5 has been allocated to Berwick district for its action for communities programme. The measures that have been identified for support include increasing the competitiveness of local companies, providing work space and developing Berwick docks.

The right hon. Gentleman will also know that, two weeks ago, the European Commission approved the UK's objective 2 fund map, which included Berwick and Berwickshire. That will ensure that many of the most needy areas in the UK benefit from the £3 billion of European regional funding for the next seven years. The north-east, including Berwick, will benefit from more than £400 million of objective 2 funding in the next seven years. In Scotland as a whole, the total value of objective 2 is about £500 million.

I assure the right hon. Gentleman that recognition of the amended assisted areas proposals, together with the new objective 2 maps, will mean that all but 1,000 people in his constituency are covered by tier 2 and tier 3. That cover has been achieved at a time when our assisted areas are being cut by a fifth and our objective 2 areas are being cut by a third. The right hon. Gentleman will agree that his constituency has got a pretty good deal.

Mr. Beith: I hope that the Minister will recognise that the largest industrial project that might be mounted in the wards of Berwick that contain the industrial estates is the one that I fear will fall between the spaces in the policies that he has described.

Mr. Caborn: We will consider those matters. The right hon. Gentleman must understand that we are acting under constraints that have been imposed by the European Commission, not Whitehall. Given that context, we have got an extremely good deal. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman and many of his colleagues in Cornwall, the north-west and south Yorkshire understand that if my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had not got the two thirds safety net in relation to objective 2 in Berlin 12 months ago, we would not have got such a good deal. Our coverage in terms of structural funds would have been considerably less—about 50 per cent. of what my right hon. Friend achieved. That coverage, the assisted areas map and what we are doing in the round for regional development agencies represent a mature approach to sustainable economic regeneration. The RDAs are considering the issue in a strategic way and that is the right way.

We could do what the previous Administration did, which was to chuck a few bob at the problem—a few crumbs off the master's table—and let areas scramble for them. However, those days have gone; our approach is about partnership and a sensible approach. We cannot deliver anything but, on this occasion, the north-east has probably got an extremely good deal. I know that it will use the resources effectively for longer-term sustainable regeneration.

The consultation is open to 2 May and we will seriously consider all proposals. We want to do the best that we can for UK Limited, within the constraints that the European Commission imposes on us.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We move on to the last debate in Westminster Hall this morning. It is initiated by the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) and the title on the Order Paper is "Regulatory supervision of the transfer of domestic utilities supplies".

Domestic Utilities Supplies

12.29 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): One of the great privileges of being a Member of Parliament is our link with constituents. Constituency casework can be onerous, especially on top of Select Committee work, but occasionally the two come together in unexpected ways. In those circumstances, the experience of constituents can reinforce parliamentary investigation, grounding the statistics of Government Departments and the National Audit Office in the genuine experience of what it feels like to be on the receiving end of Government policy.

It was precisely such a coming together of theory and practice that prompted me to initiate the debate on the regulatory supervision of the transfer of domestic utilities supplies. I apologise for the length and clumsy nature of that title. I had originally suggested "Doorstep fraud in the sale of gas and electricity", but the Table Office thought it a trifle blunt.

Some 20 million domestic customers in Britain spend around £6 billion a year on gas. Between April 1996 and May 1998, competition was introduced to the domestic gas market and customers can now choose the company that they wish to supply their gas. By February last year, 25 new companies were selling gas and more than 4 million customers had switched from the old monopoly supplier, British Gas Trading. Since April 1996, British Gas Trading has cut its price to the average consumer from £348 to £300 at 1999 prices—a reduction in real terms of £48. That is before factoring in the present Government's reduction in VAT to 5 per cent. on domestic fuel. I welcome that good news.

New gas companies have done even better. Customers who switched saw their annual bills fall not by £48, but by £78 in real terms. That shows competition working to the public benefit. Once again, I welcome that. It has meant a global reduction in customers' bills of £1 billion per year. I should like immediately to acknowledge the role of Ofgas—or Ofgem, as it is now—in driving costs down, partly through price controls, partly by nurturing competition.

The House will be aware that on 12 May last year, the National Audit Office published a report—House of Commons paper 403, 1998-99—entitled "Giving Customers a Choice—the Introduction of Competition into the Domestic Gas Market". The report broadly welcomed the introduction of competition, but highlighted certain issues about quality of service. It reported that in 1998 Ofgas and the Gas Consumers Council received 45,000 complaints from the public about gas transfers from one supplier to another.

In paragraph 13, the Comptroller and Auditor General says:

> One of the main areas concerning customers in complaints received was certain aspects of doorstep selling technique. A number of customers complained that attempts had been made to trick them into entering into contracts and others complained that salesmen had provided misleading information.

The report continues:

> In the light of these concerns, Ofgas modified the suppliers' licences to include rules covering marketing, which they then enforced after earlier attempts to secure effective self-regulation by the industry failed.

That seems to be reassuring. Ofgas acted to modify the companies' licences and set minimum standards.

Not until 45 pages later do we read the more damning follow-up:

> We found, however, that Ofgas carried out very limited monitoring of the new gas companies' compliance with their licence conditions. Ofgas explained that they had given priority to rolling out competition and now this was achieved they would give more attention to monitoring companies' compliance with their licence conditions. The Director General of Ofgas has indicated that he is committed to increasing the attention that gas suppliers give to their social obligations and to improve Ofgas monitoring of their performance in this area.

When the director general was brought before the Public Accounts Committee on 7 July last year, many hon. Members were keen to press him on that point. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) asked him directly:

> Can you explain to the Committee how it is that somebody who has never signed any piece of paper can have their gas supply transferred to a different supplier?

Mr. McCarthy responded by saying:

> There are a number of possible explanations for incorrect transfer. Sometimes it is because there has been either an incorrect address or an incorrect individual meter number recorded. Sometimes it is because there has been a clerical mistake.

The innocence is almost touching. However, to give the director general his due, he added, almost as an afterthought:

> I think sometimes in the early days of this marketing, it was undoubtedly dishonest marketing.

Undoubtedly, but not only in the early days. At the Public Accounts Committee meeting, the director general agreed with me that one of the reasons why error transfers took place was that no proof of contract was required by the supplier. All a supplier needs to do is to provide Transco with a meter reference number, or an "S" number, as it is known. When asked how many error transfers occurred each year, Mr. McCarthy conceded that there were

> something in the order of 100,000.

However, when asked why Ofgas had not done anything to tackle the problem, such as using its position as the industry regulator to insist that some proof, such as a signed contract, should be supplied to Transco before a transfer could be effected, Mr. McCarthy responded:

> Because I am not persuaded that the additional cost and delay that such a requirement would impose on the system would justify such action.

I have no doubt that Mr. McCarthy understands the gas industry better than those 100,000 people whose interests he is supposed to be protecting. However, what those 100,000 people do not understand is why the director general of Ofgem, the supposed regulator, thinks that mis-selling is a thing of the distant past and why, even when they draw his attention to specific cases of blatant abuse and downright fraud, Ofgem seems to be unable even to respond within three months.

On 27 October last year at 6.30 pm, my constituent Mr. Thrale of Kingsbury answered a knock at his door. I shall now give his account of what happened:

> It was a man who said he was from Eastern Electricity. He had not been invited by me or any other member of my household.

[Mr. Barry Gardiner]

The man asked if I had heard about electricity competition. I said I had. He said that, as I had not moved to another supplier from Eastern Electricity that they would like to write to me about their services and deals. When he asked if I would like them to do that, I said yes (this impressed me as each and every representative from the other half-dozen or so companies that have knocked on my door have all declined to send me any details about their services and company).

The man asked for my address. I offered to write it down for him on his form. To save him, and me, time, I did so and returned the form and clipboard to him. He asked for my telephone number. I declined to give him this information. He said that his boss expected him to get this. Again I declined.

He asked me to sign the form. I asked him why and he said that it was so that they could send me the information. I replied that my signature was not necessary for that. They could send me information without it. He said that he must legally get it to send the information. I replied that this was nonsense and that the law of the land said that anyone could—and do—send me marketing information.

By now I was suspicious. I looked at the form whilst he was talking and saw the word "contract" on it. I asked to see the form and took the clipboard. It was clearly a contract and I noticed a box had been pre-ticked next to the small print statement I would like Eastern to supply my gas. I told him that I was being lied to.

I challenged him about this and he said that I shouldn't worry about that. It was a mistake. I took the contract and asked him to leave. Since then I have examined the form more closely and seen that the payment method of cheque/cash has also been pre-ticked. I enclose a photocopy of the form, of which I still possess the original.

Mr. Thrale sent that account in a letter of complaint to Ofgem and to me on 28 October. His letter began,

I wish to report a criminal offence.

Ofgem sent his letter to the eastern regional office, which sent it to the Gas Consumers Council, which sent it to Eastern Electricity. By 21 January, more than three months later, Mr. Thrale had received no response to the issues that he had raised. On that date, in response to my second letter, Eastern Electricity wrote to me advising that

Eastern Electricity, as one of the UK's largest integrated energy suppliers, demands the highest standards of professionalism from every sales adviser who works on our behalf. Immediately following Mr. Thrale's complaint, the sales adviser involved was suspended pending investigation by our marketing department. They have since informed me that the adviser involved has been re-trained, and will be monitored in future to ensure similar complaints do not arise. Furthermore, I confirm that we have cancelled any and all supply agreements relating to the above address.

There never were any supply agreements relating to that address.

I wrote back to Eastern Electricity saying that I was astounded that the salesman had been allowed to remain a member of its staff and had simply been asked to go through a period of retraining. I pointed out that in my original letter I had asked that Eastern Electricity check all the other contracts sold by the salesman, as it was unlikely to have been his only misrepresentation. Eastern Electricity did not say whether it had carried out that check or whether any other bogus agreements had been discovered. I said that I was sending a copy of its response to Ofgem to ask it to investigate Eastern Electricity's handling of the matter. That was three and a half months after the original issue of doorstep mis-selling.

Ofgem's response is lengthy, containing 10 long paragraphs over three pages of dense writing, but it amounts to little. It seems to parrot what Eastern Electricity has told Ofgem, stating:

As a result of Ofgem's initial intervention, Eastern suspended and investigated the agent concerned.

We knew that. It continues:

Eastern state that the agent was then retrained and was due to be subjected to close monitoring in order to prevent further such incidents.

We knew that. It goes on to say that,

At the time of receiving Ofgem's initial complaint on behalf of Mr. Thrale, Eastern state that they had not received any previous complaints about the agent concerned; and for that reason they did not take sterner action against the agent at that time. However, since then Eastern have received further complaints regarding this agent, and as a result, have dismissed him.

Further complaints had been received, yet Eastern Electricity had not checked that every contract signed up by the agent had been done properly. The letter goes on in an unsatisfactory fashion.

I shall pass from the case of Mr. Thrale to the even more confusing case of Mr. and Mrs. Dolan. I pay tribute to my office staff—my case worker, Cathryn Evans, and my researcher on the issue, Brad Perilman—because it was a complicated situation. Seeboard thought that it had signed the Dolans up from Eastern Electricity and British Gas for its electricity and gas. It believed that it had a contract with Mr. Dolan, but he had no recollection of signing up with Seeboard. He could not have done so even if he had wanted to, because, according to British Gas, Mrs. Dolan had signed up with it from Eastern Electricity for the electricity supply. Therefore, it was no longer possible for Seeboard to sign up Mr. and Mrs. Dolan from Eastern Electricity. None of the parties knew that, however, because Mr. and Mrs. Dolan were not aware that they had entered into an agreement.

Mrs. Dolan is an elderly lady who has recently suffered a stroke and is still receiving medical attention. She was relaxing in her garden one afternoon, trying to recuperate from her illness, when a charming young man presented himself over the fence and started chatting to her. Apparently, on the basis of that conversation and without anything being signed, her supply was transferred. Mr. Dolan wrote to me in high dudgeon, stating that he could not understand how his supplies had been transferred to Seeboard. When people from Seeboard eventually responded to my calls they produced, after much pleading, a transcript of the conversation, which they said showed that a verbal contract had been entered into. What it showed in fact was that Mr. Dolan was extremely confused about the nature of the conversation that he was having with the person from Seeboard.

Ofgem, the regulator, is supposed to protect people such as the Dolans. Mr. Thale, an acute and intelligent young man, saw what was going on and took action. It took the regulator three and a half months to fail to do anything about compensation, or to investigate that case. The situation for Mr. and Mrs. Dolan is a lot worse. Let us not forget that 100,000 such error transfers happen every year. People may simply be confused about which company they have said that they might like to go with. When asked whether they know that there is competition and that they may be able to get gas

and electricity more cheaply, they say, "Oh yes, we know that." They find out a few weeks later that they are being billed by a different supplier.

The Government must press Ofgem to do its job properly and to ensure that written evidence of a contract is required, so that there are no more cases of telephone conversations with confused, elderly individuals being adduced as the reason for a transfer of supply. Ofgem has done a good job in pressing for competition in the market and in trying to reduce the price of gas and electricity. However, it must take seriously its role of protecting the consumer and ensure that what has been a great boon—cheaper gas and electricity—does not become a nightmare for the 100,000 people every year who fail to understand why they are paying money to people of whom they have never heard.

12.48 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) on securing the debate and recognise the passion that he feels in relation to the cases that he has described. I have seen the correspondence relating to the case of Mr. Thrale, but not of the Dolans. I undertake personally to pursue the cases of Mr. Thrale and the Dolans, and I will ensure that the director general of Ofgem receives a copy of my hon. Friend's comments from this morning, to ensure that appropriate action is taken.

My hon. Friend began by saying that it is often a happy happenstance that one's roles as a constituency Member of Parliament and as a member of a Select Committee coincide. I have read his interrogation—if I may call it that—of the director general, and I recognise that his questioning came from a specific angle.

It is also a fortunate occurrence—perhaps happy is the wrong word—when as a Minister I handle issues that I confront as a constituency Member of Parliament. Few Members of the House will not have had cause to consider instances of doorstep mis-selling—not only of gas and electricity, although in those cases the issues involved are still fresh. Many of our constituents remain puzzled about how gas and electricity can be supplied by several different companies, because they are confused about whether the gas has to come through separate pipes. I understand that confusion, on which some people play.

My hon. Friend alleges criminal behaviour. It is important that companies pursue criminal action when there is clear evidence that agents acted in a particular way. I am sure that my hon. Friend recognises that in the first instance that is a matter for the Director of Public Prosecutions. I should like the DPP to prosecute in such cases, but it is not for me to say where the priority should lie in that department.

It is vital that action is taken. The issue has featured in many consumer television programmes. "Watchdog" made an interesting and rather frightening investigation into some of the selling techniques employed on the doorstep. As a consumer, I would not want to be confronted with some of the aggressive selling techniques that have been applied on the doorstep.

We should put the matter in context. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the extent to which competition in gas and electricity supply has driven down prices. He and I are of a similar ethnic origin, and are well aware that people who look after the pennies find that the pounds look after themselves. Consumers can be something like £20 better off as a consequence of increased competition in gas and electricity supply. In the vast majority of cases, no problems are experienced in the transfer. However, today we must consider cases in which problems are encountered. Sometimes, such problems are the result of error, and we all recognise that errors are made. However, when I hear of cases such as those of Mr. Thrale and Mr. and Mrs. Dolan, it becomes more pressing to ensure that instances of unacceptable mis-selling are probed much more aggressively.

I am not trying to mitigate or pass the buck for the difficulties experienced by my hon. Friend's constituents, but we are introducing a Bill on the regulation of utilities that focuses on the consumer's role. Until the Bill receives Royal Assent, the legal requirement on the regulator continues to focus on the shareholder before the rights of the consumer. The Utilities Bill will change that, giving the consumer pride of place. A new Gas and Electricity Consumer Council will be created, which will have a much closer relationship with the regulatory authority.

Interestingly, my hon. Friend referred to the regulator by name. That is perfectly understandable, as at the moment the regulator is a single individual. Mr. McCarthy is a talented and experienced gentleman who has taken his work extremely seriously, as have other regulators. However, it is important to depersonalise regulation. The Utilities Bill will create a regulatory authority that will be responsible for consumer interests, backed up by and working with the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will impose social and environmental guidelines that will dictate the work of the regulatory authority.

My hon. Friend is aware that by changing supplier—even if they did not know that they were doing so—Mr. Thrale and Mr. and Mrs. Dolan might have had an opportunity to benefit from lower tariffs. Sadly, many poorer consumers cannot benefit from better tariffs. My hon. Friend and I share a commitment to ensure that stories such as those of the Thrales and the Dolans should not discourage poorer people. The regulator should be able to help the fuel poor to benefit from competition by driving down their bills.

My hon. Friend will want concrete evidence of how the regulator and the Government can help constituents such as Mr. Thrale and the Dolans. In November last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced an inquiry into gas and electricity competition, not least because the amount of switching that we had anticipated had not occurred. Other reasons were the lack of balance and the opportunity to examine instances of mis-selling. Ofgem extended its market licence conditions for a further two years and is currently considering responses to its proposal to develop the existing licence conditions for companies. Measures under consideration include a requirement for domestic gas and electricity companies

[Mrs. Helen Liddell]

to have effective management of the sales agents who act on their behalf. In some cases, Mr. Winterton, they are sub-contractors—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The chair is addressed as Mr. Deputy Speaker or Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mrs. Liddell: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am used to seeing you in another setting, in which you are always extremely helpful. I shall return to referring to you as Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The consultation will look at ensuring that gas suppliers provide customers who have entered into contracts over the telephone with a copy of the terms and conditions of the contract, which is along the lines that apply for electricity customers. It will also consider extension of the coverage of conditions to sales undertaken in public places, such as shopping centres and over the garden fence, which is relevant to Mrs. Dolan's case. Extension of the conditions will also cover certain aspects of internet sales. Ofgem has continued to seek supplier compliance with the marketing conditions and good market practice by suppliers.

In addition to monitoring performance, Ofgem has been engaged in an active programme of review meetings with suppliers, identifying lapses in suppliers' arrangements and highlighting best practice. A recent industry workshop linked general electricity regulation with overall consumer regulation. That protects the consumer, not least by providing an opportunity for a cooling-off period on contracts that may be signed. Ofgem intends to put into the public domain data on consumer complaints against individual suppliers. That will be done on a monthly basis and for the year to date. It will allow customers and others to establish the relative performance of gas and electricity suppliers. If there is to be proper competition and effective operation of the market, information must be available about how companies conduct themselves. That is a powerful way of ensuring that they behave properly. In another setting, I found it to be of considerable use in concentrating companies' attention on customers with whom they are not dealing properly. A good experience of competitive gas and electricity markets is important in the first instance, which is often on the doorstep. It would be unacceptable if people were deprived of their rights, or lost out on the benefits of competition. I shall consider my hon. Friend's points, and I congratulate him on his contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 April 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Ethiopia

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

9.30 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): It is difficult to believe that this debate is necessary, but I thank Madam Speaker for granting it. I have made six unsuccessful attempts to ask a private notice question during the past two and a half weeks. The hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), the Conservative spokesman, has also requested a PNQ. That is unusually coy behaviour on the part of the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that you will be aware, as the hon. Lady should be, that the granting of private notice questions is nothing to do with the Government. They are entirely in the gift of Madam Speaker. Normally, such matters are not referred to, but had that request been granted, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I would have been only too pleased to answer a PNQ on the subject.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has given as good a ruling on that matter as I could have done. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) would be well advised to note the criteria that govern private notice questions.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you advise the Committee that nothing could have prevented the Government from volunteering a statement?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is verging on matters of debate. We might be advised to deal with the substance of the matter before us. I call the hon. Member for Richmond Park.

Dr. Tonge: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I stand corrected. As a relatively new Member, I am not aware of the procedural niceties of the House.

I am nevertheless delighted that the debate has been granted, although I still find it difficult to believe that it is necessary. We all remember the terrible famine in Ethiopia in 1984. I remember it particularly well because, thanks to Bob Geldof—now Sir Bob—my eldest son, who was a young teenager at the time, was terribly interested in development issues. My son described himself as a rockabilly, but I never found out what it meant. However, the famine in Ethiopia geared up a whole generation of young people to become interested in development issues. That interest has remained with them.

I am sure that at that time, the House agonised and debated, held inquiries and resolved that such a famine should not happen again. Some hon. Members will be able to remind us about that. Since then, many other disasters have occurred, including the famine in the Sudan in 1989. In 1998, I was a member of the Select Committee on International Development, when it debated those problems. I remember, during that terrible time in southern Sudan, that systems were set up and we all thought that it could not happen again in that part of Africa.

Operation Lifeline Sudan was set up after the famine in southern Sudan in 1989. We had been warned of food shortages and famine in October 1997, but it was not until February or March 1998 that the usual images of starving children appeared on our television screens—the harrowing sight of families with little children literally starving to death before our eyes. That is when people responded. That is when the non-governmental organisations responded and when the Government kicked into activity.

It feels horribly as if the same thing is happening again. By the spring of 1998, many thousands of Sudanese people had died. Ethiopia is not unlike the Sudan; there is conflict, drought, poverty and a lack of long-term development, which is the ideal mix that leads to famine. There has been drought in Ethiopia for the past four years. The Ethiopian Government have been issuing warnings about food security during that time and they are now appealing for 1.2 million tonnes of food aid. If that aid does not arrive, 8 million lives will be at risk in Ethiopia alone, and it is estimated that 16 million lives could be at risk in the Horn of Africa as a whole.

Mr. Foulkes: To coincide with the hon. Lady's success in this debate, the Department for International Development has published an information bulletin on Ethiopia. It is available on the internet and hard copies are available now—I have already given the hon. Lady one.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the Minister for that intervention, but I will not suggest that we should all go home and read the document instead of staying here. The title of the debate was deliberately broadened in an attempt to enable us to consider some of the issues behind the knee-jerk reaction that has to take place when a famine occurs. The matter is much more complicated than that reaction would imply.

Once again, starving children are appearing on our television screens, although they have been wiped off them during the past couple of days because of the troubles in Zimbabwe. I am sure that we will see them again during the Easter weekend. Apparently, the situation is not yet a famine. It is not a famine because the United Nations assessors have not reported back, as the war with Eritrea is said to be using up Ethiopia's resources and not enough people are dying each day. Apparently, a particular number of people must die every day for a famine to occur. In spite of what we have

[Dr. Tonge]

seen, not enough people are doing so, which is very inconvenient. It is tempting to remind the House of these words:

> Any man's death diminishes me...And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls.

Surely famine does not have to be a matter of numbers.

I am pleased to inform you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Madam Speaker has recognised the great need that exists. Last night, in Speaker's House, under the auspices of a non-governmental organisation called Farm Africa, Madam Speaker launched a campaign called "Send a Tonne to Africa", meaning a tonne of grain or cereal. People are asked to contribute large or small sums that will be used to purchase grain locally from African farmers. The amount can be a kilo or a tonne, or whatever can be afforded. Madam Speaker has pump primed the appeal by donating £3,000, and last night she raised £10,000 in an hour, which was not bad going. We should all thank her and congratulate her on the effort that she is making to highlight the problems in Ethiopia.

What is going wrong with the world's response? As I said, Ethiopia needs 1.2 million tonnes of food. So far, or at least until 10 April–I have not yet read the Department for International Development briefing–350,000 tonnes have been pledged. After the previous famine in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Government established a disaster prevention and preparedness commission to provide early warnings and an emergency food security reserve to provide relief food. A pharaoh's granary exists in Ethiopia to provide for the lean years by storing up food from the fat years. What has happened to it? Sadly, it has been depleted by loans to donors, which include the United States, the European Union, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany and the World Food Programme, which have plundered the store of food that was set aside for Ethiopia. The World Food Programme is on that list, but also runs Operation Lifeline Sudan in northern Kenya to provide food aid to southern Sudan.

What sort of madness is that? It is not as if the world is short of food. Why were not the resources replenished by the international community or, on our own doorstep, by the European Union? That question is especially important in the light of the warnings of food shortages that were given last year. How much has the United Kingdom contributed to the European Union food aid fund? Why have we not pressed Brussels to act sooner? Why have we failed to respond adequately to the United Nation's appeal in January for $10 million for health care and water supplies? Only $1 million has been received so far. What is happening about the rapid response force to disasters called for by Sir Bob Geldof a couple of days ago? The Liberal Democrats discussed such a force extensively during the Mozambique disaster. The idea is not new but neither the European Community Humanitarian Office nor the United Nations seem able to provide the world with that much-needed facility.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I am very much enjoying the hon. Lady's speech. She touches on an important matter—the performance of the multilateral agencies in such situations. Does she agree that the response is disappointing more often than not? I was wondering this morning whether I could think of a situation in which the multilateral agencies had responded well in such a crisis. Can she think of an example? What would she suggest we do to improve the performance of the UN and the EU?

Dr. Tonge: That intervention was useful. I am a great European and a great fan of the United Nations, but I am the first person to admit that they are not getting matters right. We must get them right. A country on its own cannot deliver the response needed in a disaster. Consider the problem of heavy-lift equipment in the Mozambique disaster. Provision of such equipment is not for one country alone. Not all countries can have their own heavy-lift equipment to use once in a million years. We need to work together as a group of countries and we must put much more effort into doing that. I am not apologising in any sense for the European Union or the United Nations. I am simply saying that there must be a way. The world needs us to find a way.

No wonder I have a sense of deja vu. The same confusion, lack of response and failure to heed early warnings before the media and the newsmen arrive happened two years ago and it will all happen in two years' time if we are not careful.

Before I leave the subject of immediate humanitarian aid, it must be noted that the war with Eritrea has made the use of ports in that country impossible. That is undoubtedly a factor. Can Djibouti cope with the demand for ships bringing in grain and other supplies? There are good reports, including some from the Ethiopian Government and the non-governmental organisations, that much is being done in that port to make access easier and to get supplies in.

I have studied the atlas hard to try to work out whether it would be possible to use Lokichokio in northern Kenya. The question interests me. I have seen the fleet of Hercules aircraft and the tonnes and tonnes of food aid stored there. Yes, the food is needed for southern Sudan, but the Hercules aircraft are a possible means of transport. I wonder whether it would be possible to use that facility.

In responding to the crisis in the Sudan two years' ago, the Secretary of State for International Development said:

> Spend less on development, fail in development, more and more poverty, more and more crisis, more and more humanitarian disaster, more and more appeals, more and more failure, more and more suffering, more and more poverty. No addressing the causes or underlying concerns.

As the statement makes clear, without proper long-term development, famines and catastrophes will continue.

Ethiopia has doubled its population in the past 15 years. There is over-crowding, poor farming practice, soil deterioration and deforestation. All those factors contribute to conflict and famine. Many NGOs, including Christian Aid, have been working in the region to develop sustainable practices, such as the construction of earth dams to collect water and the better roads that are essential if Ethiopia is to haul itself out of poverty. The Government of Ethiopia have conducted a massive road-building programme and are making huge efforts to improve agriculture. Why, then,

is the United Kingdom cutting long-term development aid to Ethiopia from, as I understand it, £39 million to £19 million in the next three years? In a country where 45 per cent. of the population live on less than a dollar a day, the Ethiopian Government spend twice as much on debt servicing as they do on primary education. All the factors are present. Why are we cutting aid?

I understand, and have been told many times by the Secretary of State, that long-term development aid is not provided to countries in conflict—or that there is a reluctance to do so. The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea costs Ethiopia £1 million a day. That is a terrible waste. However, if we cut development aid because it may be misappropriated by warring factions, as it is alleged is happening in southern Sudan. how can we break the cycle of poverty, conflict and famine that repeats over and over again? I am not suggesting that this is an easy problem to deal with, and I am not apportioning blame; I am just opening the matter for debate.

Can we not provide the development aid through the NGOs that are brave enough to work in dangerous zones? Indeed, the United Kingdom Government do that in some places. Despite what is happening in Zimbabwe, there has been an increase in development aid via the NGOs, for which I applaud them. That aid is provided despite Zimbabwe's involvement in the war in the Congo, also. Development aid to Sierra Leone has also increased, but the situation there is hardly stable or safe. However, that is not to happen for southern Sudan, where the civil war has been running for 30 years, or for Ethiopia. Why?

Southern Sudan and Ethiopia are to receive no, or little, development aid. Apparently, the carrot and stick are to be offered to them. Aid will come only when the fighting stops. The civil war in southern Sudan has been going on for 30 years. The one plea that I received from mothers during my visit was for teachers to educate their children. Not only did their children have nothing to do, but the mothers argued that, however the war continued and whatever raids were made on their villages, education could not be taken from their children. Once it was in their brains, it was there. Generations are missing out.

Are the children of Ethiopia to suffer the same fate? I do not defend the war in either country. In fact, I was appalled by President Zenawi's remarks last week that he would not attempt to broker a peace with Eritrea. He said:

> We do not believe that protecting one's sovereignty is a luxury for the rich alone.

Nevertheless, we must ensure that aid for education and basic health care is provided, even during conflict. It is the only way to break the cycle.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Surely the dilemma is how much the hon. Lady would expect food aid to perpetuate the war and the conditions that prevent children from benefiting from education, because they die from malnutrition.

Dr. Tonge: That crosses the two issues. I do not suggest that we should not give humanitarian aid—food and water. Those things must be got to the children, whether there is war or not. My argument is that development aid—particularly education, because we all know how important primary education is to a country's development—should not be cut simply because of conflict. Not only is it crucial, but not much is needed. In the Sudan, little is required to educate children—a teacher, a shady tree and, with luck, slates and chalks or a few bits of paper and the odd book. They are not asking for much. Those things cannot be destroyed by war. If the teachers and children flee, education can carry on.

Many questions need to be answered about the reaction to the immediate crisis in Ethiopia and about our long-term policy on development aid to countries in conflict. I thank the Minister for listening. I hope that he will provide answers before the images of death and suffering return to our television screens.

9.50 am

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on securing the debate. She was not alone in wanting to raise this subject. Many people have been involved in activities similar to those that have occupied her in previous weeks. The Department for International Development has been keen to explain its position on the response to the famine in Ethiopia.

In a debate on Ethiopia that I initiated in December 1989, I quoted the Foreign Affairs Committee report of 1988 on famine in the Horn of Africa. It said:

> An impression may have been created in the donor countries that, since so many lessons have been learnt, the horrors of 1984-85 would not recur. This would be dangerously false optimism...But droughts will occur again—the rains have failed or been inadequate in 3 of the last 4 years—and with a fast-growing population, poor farming techniques, widespread deforestation and land degradation, the consequent famines are likely to be increasingly severe...And by each successive drought the resilience of the people and of the land is diminished. It is a spiral which, if unbroken, may result in tragedy.—[*Official Report*, 13 December 1989; Vol. 163, c. 1062.]

Who would have thought that in 2000 we would be debating the same problems? Weather is difficult to control in any country, however, and in the countries of Africa people are so dependent on it for their survival.

The Secretary of State for International Development said in a written answer that the UN estimates that more than 12 million people face serious food shortages in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Djibouti and Somalia are suffering to a varying extent. We know, however, that the people of Ethiopia are most at risk. Even in good rain years, 5 million to 6 million Ethiopians are partially dependent on food aid—about 8 million face famine in Ethiopia now. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, food aid is essential. We need to respond quickly to the plight of the Ethiopian Government.

Last night, I read a briefing paper by the Ethiopian Government, which most hon. Members will have received. It asks what the difference is between 1984 and now and explains:

> Ethiopia has changed dramatically in the past eight years. Since the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991, Ethiopia has been a democracy and the Government has been working continually to improve infrastructure, agricultural methods and training for farmers to alleviate the impact of rain failure and crop failure. Food security and self-sufficiency is the No. 1 priority of the Government. It should also be pointed out that Ethiopia has not been in the grip of drought and food shortages since 1984.

[Ann Clwyd]

That certainly was not the case in 1989, when there was a similar problem. It goes on to say:

> The improvements in agriculture and infrastructure since 1991 . . . meant that Ethiopia actually exported food to neighbouring countries in both 1996 and 1997. The problems since then have been unfavourable climactic conditions and the lack of adequate donor response,

to which the hon Lady has already referred. She also spoke about the extreme poverty in the country.

I visited Ethiopia just before the fall of Mengistu and saw the great efforts that were being made at the time by United Nations agencies. The United Nations Development Project was attempting to give information to farmers. I went out on field trips with people from that project and saw them instructing farmers on how best to use their poor soil. The farmers queued halfway up a mountain to receive that instruction. UNDP was bemoaning the fact that it did not have more resources at its disposal to provide more education programmes to farmers, who are keen to learn. There has also been an enormous population explosion, which was clear even in 1989. Again, the United Nations population programmes in Ethiopia were completely overloaded by demand, and long queues of people were waiting in the streets to obtain information from the UN clinics. Therefore, we must look again at the resources that the UN can deploy in countries such as Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has endured four successive seasons of drought. The rainy seasons—one in February and one in the summer—did not bring any rain, but they are vital because they contribute to 50 per cent. of crop production in some parts of the country. For the past three years, the rains that begin in February have been very short and this year they did not arrive at all. Ethiopia's farmers are probably more dependent on rain than farmers in any other African country. In its good briefing, Oxfam says,

> Crop production has been decimated and 95 per cent. of the livestock have been lost in the Ogaden in the south.

We have seen the pictures on television of carcases lying all over the desert. The herdsmen, who are dependent on their livestock for milk and income, have been killing them as a last resort to survive. The population of Ethiopia has doubled since 1985, so land is being divided into smaller plots that allow farmers to produce a family's grain needs for three to four months of the year on average. The soil is being overused and exhausted as a consequence. Soil erosion is so bad that billions of tonnes of soil are washed away each year. Farmers are not allowed to own their land, which is a disincentive to investment in it. Deforestation in Ethiopia has made the problem of soil erosion worse. Only 3 per cent. of the land in Ethiopia is now covered by trees, which is extraordinary.

International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies mean that Ethiopia spends more on servicing debt than on health and education. I believe that Ethiopia has outstanding Export Credits Guarantee Department loans to the UK to the sum of £15 million. Its total external debt is $10.4 billion, which is 169 per cent. of its annual gross national product and 10 times the value of its exports. Clearly, that is ridiculous.

The new Ethiopian Government have attempted to put in place projects to mitigate the effects of drought, such as building earth dams to catch the limited rainwater. They have introduced measures to reduce poverty, such as establishing credit unions and initiating job creation schemes in urban areas. They have made improvements in infrastructure—for instance through road-building programmes—to speed up food delivery in times of famine. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, all those projects have been undermined by the cutting back of western aid in response to the war with Eritrea.

In the mid-1990s the IMF insisted on cuts in social spending to ensure budget surpluses. Ethiopia is not in the heavily indebted poor countries scheme and still pays a massive amount in debt service payments: last year, the figure was £60 million. Therefore, while ordinary people in the west generously donate money with one hand, western banks and Governments take it back with the other in interest payments.

The drought and famine have been compounded by the war with Eritrea, even though little fighting is going on at present. The Ethiopian Government should acknowledge that, because they maintain an enormous standing army of 400,000 men along the border with Eritrea, which costs the country £631,000 a day to maintain. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister told me in an answer on 5 April that international efforts were in hand to bring the war with Eritrea to a conclusion. I do not know what those efforts are and would like to hear more about them. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will refer to them in his reply.

The International Development Committee has looked many times at the impact of conflict, and at its draining effect on the economy and well-being of the countries where conflict is a perpetual fact of life. At the same time as we are trying to relieve the famine, international efforts should be made to bring that conflict to an end.

There are worrying reports that, despite the famine, Ethiopia is preparing to launch a new offensive against Eritrea. On 13 April, the Ethiopian Prime Minister refused to rule out launching another offensive. That again underlines the need for rapid international attempts to end the conflict.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park said that the Ethiopian Government had reserves of food, but they have dropped to 30,000 tonnes, which is only enough for about two weeks' emergency distribution. Western Governments gave the Ethiopians written assurances that supplies that were borrowed would be replenished as soon as possible, but the donors have failed to replenish. The European Union alone has failed to replenish 78,000 tonnes from the stores.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the hon. Lady for emphasising that point. Like me, does she not feel outraged that, in spite of the experience of the past 10 to 15 years and after all the discussion, debate and inquiries, the world could have allowed those food stores to be depleted to such an extent?

Ann Clwyd: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. If those food stores were borrowed and promises were made on paper to replenish them, it is a disgrace that they have not been replenished.

Appeals were made for additional food aid as long ago as November 1999, but, as of 1 April, no food supplies had arrived in Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian Foreign Minister said that the world seems to react only when it sees "skeletons on screens". The United Nations launched an appeal for £190 million on 28 January 2000. Oxfam has accused the international community of dragging its feet by not sending aid quickly enough and sending only half the amount that it promised in 1999. Oxfam has provided some interesting figures, which are worth examining, but I shall not read them out now.

The Secretary of State for International Development stated on 12 April that since January, the United Kingdom has committed £4.5 million in aid, including 16,500 tonnes of food. The Department has said that it is ready to do more as needs emerge, and, compared with many other countries, the United Kingdom's record has been extremely good and cannot be faulted.

The UN special envoy recently visited Ethiopia and made strong speeches, stating that it is now time for the international community to act. She met the Ethiopian Prime Minister and was told that the west was using the war with Eritrea as an excuse for its slow reaction to the famine. That may be his opinion, but the response has been good since the needs became fully known. Television has an important role because it puts pressure on Governments that need to be pressurised, and it leads to a good response from the public.

I shall spell out what the United Kingdom should do. If it is not doing so already, it must work with its EU partners and the international community to ensure that all food and non-food aid requested by Ethiopia and the aid agencies arrives as quickly as possible. It must provide cash so that food can be bought locally. Most urgently, it must bring the Eritreans, southern separatist groups and Ethiopians together to try to secure an agreement to end the conflict, at least in the short term, and open access to other ports in Eritrea to speed up aid delivery.

In the long term, the United Kingdom must try to bring that damaging war to an end. It must then discuss with the Ethiopians and aid agencies the problems of infrastructure and logistics to find the best and quickest means of overcoming them. It must try to deal with the underlying causes of recurring famine and break the cycle of crisis that arose in 1984, 1989 and now in 2000.

The IMF, the World Bank and creditor Governments should re-examine Ethiopia's and Eritrea's foreign debt and suspend, reschedule or cancel it and offer quicker and deeper debt relief, perhaps as a carrot for their efforts to end the war. The multilateral development banks and donor Governments should offer substantial and additional long-term assistance to Ethiopia and Eritrea. Finally, the Ethiopian Government, through the World Bank, the UN, and aid agencies, should be encouraged to develop an effective strategy to tackle land ownership and soil erosion. In the long term, that will enable Ethiopian families to feed themselves and, hopefully, bring the cycle of crisis to an end so that, after 2000, we no longer witness pitifully thin, exhausted Ethiopians dying on our television screens.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. It may be of assistance if I remind hon. Members of the convention during these 90-minute debates to give the Floor to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman 30 minutes before the close of the debate. Only two Front-Bench speakers remain, so I shall call the Opposition spokesman at 10.40, leaving 40 minutes in which to fit four other hon. members. I therefore appeal to those hon. Members to be as concise as possible, so that we can accommodate everyone.

10.10 am

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Thank you, Mr. Cook.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must also remind hon. Members that the House has decided, in its wisdom, that Westminster Hall is not a Committee. It is the House and the person in the Chair must, therefore, be addressed accordingly.

Mr. Baldry: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is still a novel forum for some of us, and I must say that it is not a particularly pleasant forum. I like to be able to see the Minister's eyes when I address the Chamber.

I shall not repeat what the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) has said, because she put it very well. I shall make several further points. My interest in Ethiopia started when I went there with the hon. Members for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) and for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) in 1984 under the auspices of Save the Children and Oxfam. I was also chairman of the Anglo-Ethiopian Society for some time.

I must first express some sympathy for the Minister. I once held the post that he now holds and I know that there is a temptation in the House to criticise the Government whenever there is a disaster. Hon. Members must recognise that, for better or for ill, the Department extracts a sum from the Treasury in these circumstances; one can argue that it is not sufficiently large, but it is a sum. Under law, the Department must also meet its obligations to the dependent territories and to the Commonwealth. Then, we all ask the Department to enter into long-term development programmes. By definition, those require long-term funding.

Another problem that is sometimes forgotten is that, before the Department spends even a penny on bilateral aid, a substantial chunk of its budget is extracted to pay our contributions to the European Union. In this crisis, 17 per cent. of all EU aid comes from the United Kingdom. We do not get credit for that and we do not give ourselves credit for it. The EU will have given about 432,000 tonnes of aid to Ethiopia, a fifth of which will effectively have come from the United Kingdom.

We should not be so speedy to criticise the Department for International Development. Given the

[Mr. Baldry]

competing claims on its budget, Ministers have been trying hard to give continuing support to Ethiopia—a food security adviser is there now.

I also endorse the Government's decision not to give further long-term development aid to Ethiopia while the war against Eritrea is raging. We have few enough carrots and sticks in these circumstances. It is sad that the international community has not yet succeeded in making greater progress. The United Nations has not yet managed to establish a line of control.

As the hon. Member for Cynon Valley said, it is extraordinarily sad that a country as poor as Ethiopia is committing so many of its young, able-bodied men to a conflict a long way from home and spending so much money on it. The international community and the United Nations must give a higher priority to resolving that conflict. We have become very bad at international conflict resolution. We have almost accepted the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia as a fact of life.

The Department has the capacity to do much more about logistics—a point made recently in the other place by Baroness Chalker of Wallasey, who probably knows more about these aspects of Africa than anyone. The Ethiopian Government's briefing pointed out that pledges are not enough; it is delivery of aid that is needed. During the 1984 famine, the Royal Air Force and others put enormous effort into distributing food aid. In a crisis, one needs disciplined lines of command and controls. The Royal Logistics Corps is a brilliant organisation, which did fantastic work in Rwanda. If the Minister is pressured by the House to do more, he should send members of the Royal Logistics Corps and the Royal Air Force to help distribute food aid in Ethiopia, rather than simply persuading the Treasury to get out its cheque book. That would be a far greater contribution. It is also a visible contribution that would earn respect from the international community and enable us to lever in influence.

I endorse the Government's refusal to give long-term development aid to Ethiopia while the war against Eritrea rages. My right hon. and hon. Friends will probably agree that, while the terrible internal conflict in Zimbabwe continues, the Government must think in terms of sticks and carrots and it would be right to suspend development aid to Zimbabwe until the horrors cease. If one is pursuing a particular policy in one part of the world, it should be pursued consistently.

Considerable progress has been made in Ethiopia since 1984, and the situation has certainly changed since then. The international community appears to have a far better grasp on events, but we are clearly moving towards a crisis. Doubtless the Minister will assure us that, proportionate to the crisis, Her Majesty's Government are doing all that they can. Many people will give him the benefit of the doubt, recognise the limitations within which he works, and hope that he can persuade the House that all necessary steps are being taken. However, if the Government are seen to be responding disproportionately, they will be condemned by the whole country. As has been said, we should learn from previous lessons. We have considerable experience in contributing to food aid distribution in Ethiopia. I hope that, in those and other areas, we can be seen to be doing everything humanly possible.

10.17 am

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): Obviously, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I welcome this debate. Given the brief time available, I shall make only one point. In respect of the war, we must not let Ethiopia off the hook. We all carry the heavy burden of war throughout the world. Fifteen of the top 20 recipients of European aid are involved in wars and conflict.

I want to discuss the speed with which the European Union reacts to such crises through its European Community Humanitarian Office. In pursuing its stated task of ensuring that goods and services reach crisis zones quickly, ECHO repeatedly fails. That is a recurring problem. Wherever one goes, one sees evidence of ECHO's failure. We were told that European aid had been provided to ease the famines in Somalia, but we saw no evidence of that on the ground. Eventually, we discovered that the aid was stuck in warehouses in Mombasa, Kenya. It took many months to reach Somalia.

On visiting Mozambique, we discovered a similar problem. The Commissioner arrived on 1 March, long after the crisis had passed, and announced aid of €25 million. That money was not planned for; one did not know where it was going, and it would be spent long after the event. Similarly, the International Development Committee criticised ECHO's actions in Kosovo.

In Ethiopia, it is the same old story. Announcements are occasionally made that the European Union is to give relief food, but where it goes or when it turns up is covered in mystery. *Arabic News*—which, of course, I read daily—reported on 8 November 1999 that Ethiopia was to get 46,000 tonnes in EU relief. Where did it go? I believe that 30,000 tonnes of it has just turned up in Djibouti. However, it is five months late and its arrival in Djibouti does not mean that it will be quickly distributed in Ethiopia.

On 10 April, the Relief Web and the BBC reported that the EU plans to ship 800,000 tonnes to the region this year. Commissioner Nielson said that if we can now plan in a reasonably professional way to ship 800,000 tonnes, that will be a good start. Does the EU have plans or merely vague aspirations? I suspect that it may be the latter.

Two days later, the position changed. On 12 April, Chris Patten, standing in for Mr. Nielson, told the European Parliament that the Commission had programmed the delivery of 283,000 tonnes. A close reading of his words reveals that that includes the 48,000 tonnes that should have arrived last year. He also said that the EU was about to decide on the delivery of an additional quantity of up to 260,000 tonnes.

The organisation does not know what it is doing. What happened to the 800,000 tonnes that was mentioned two days earlier? Oxfam has said that the EU failed to meet its commitment last year. It provided only half the food that it promised and is now more than a year behind on its pledges.

ECHO does not give the impression of being under control. If one really wants to lose faith in it, one should go to its website. Clicking on the icon for financial decisions and selecting Ethopia brings up the information, "Beneficiary: Ethopia: last statement 16 December 1998". There is no reference to money

going in or to the target population. The events section of ECHO's website gives information about events of September 1999. The speeches section offers the speeches of Emma Bonino, the former European Commissioner with responsibility for humanitarian affairs, who is no longer in post. If one looks up parliamentary questions asked about ECHO, it appears that the most recent question was asked on 6 April 1998. *ECHO News*, the organisation's publication for the public, seemingly last appeared in December 1997. ECHO does not know what it is doing; it is out of control. That is crucially important, because it claims to be the world's largest donor of humanitarian funds and is our major representative in that respect.

This problem concerns not only Ethiopia, but the entire Horn of Africa. Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Eritrea and Djibouti are under the threat of drought and the position may worsen if the next rains fail to arrive. This is not an emergency such as that in Mozambique—an act of God whereby the rains suddenly fell out of the sky—because it was predicted. In July 1999, the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs referred to the worsening drought in Ethiopia. Reference has already been made to the running down of the food stores—for example, the European Union borrowed 80,000 tonnes that it did not return.

Will the Minister explain the basis on which we contribute to ECHO? I have looked at the statistics on the amounts that are contributed by the countries involved. Astonishingly, the Netherlands is the most generous contributor. The Scandinavians contribute a large amount, while our contribution is approximately average. The French, Portuguese and Greeks give virtually nothing. I am beginning to think that they are wise in that respect.

I believe in international organisations. The hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) asked for evidence of situations in which they work. They do work—the World Food Programme delivers brilliantly. On occasion, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has worked well, but it does not always do so. However, I have never heard people praise ECHO's contribution to any emergency. What is the Government's view?

10.24 am

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I shall be brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on securing this important debate and the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on her contribution.

It is tragic to see on our television screens once again the terrible suffering of the people of Ethiopia. We had hoped that we had found the solutions that would prevent such tragedies from recurring. I am afraid that we all have to take some responsibility. There has been a tragic failure in development and a great failure on the part of the Ethiopian Government. I do not seek to exculpate or to excuse them from their responsibility for this tragedy. Their pursuit of war and their military spending, which the hon. Member for Cynon Valley discussed, have been significant factors. They could have reorganised agriculture and infrastructure in a manner that would prevent the occurrence of such tragedies.

We all know what needs to be done. Twenty years ago, 70 per cent. of Ethiopia was covered in forest, but now less than 20 per cent. of it is. That reduction will affect rainfall and the soil's stability and induce drought. That canopy has to be replaced and we know how to do it—we know how to build dams to trap the water that is necessary to irrigate the trees when they are first planted. However, to do that, we need to put in place a thorough development programme that will encourage people not to cut down trees for heating and cooking purposes—other ways of cooking and providing warmth at night will have to be found.

Although we know how to take such steps, why have we not done so? Why have we not pursued those objectives during the past 10 years, after the previous tragic famine occurred? So far as I can gather, no progress has been made in southern Ethiopia. I imagine that more programmes have been put in place in the Tigrayan areas of Dese, because Tigrayans dominate the Ethiopian Government, which brings us back to the fact that the responsibility for the tragedy lies with that Government and their insane pursuit of a tragic war, which has killed many people on both sides of the border. They have unnecessarily spent huge sums of money on that war.

The British Government created a problem when they changed the direction of aid that is sent to Ethiopia. The Department for International Development decided not to give reduced amounts of money to non-governmental organisations and to give more through Ethiopian Government Departments. The problem with that approach is that once the money has been given, we do not know where it ends up. It has clearly been used to buy arms to pursue the war against Eritrea—it has not been used to preserve the environment, build dams or provide the water that is necessary for drinking, cooking and agriculture. The British Government's policy is mistaken. They must return to the previous policy of sending money to competent NGOs in the field and supporting long-term sustainable development programmes. That might prevent the occurrence of such tragedies.

In the meantime, we have to get food to the starving people and we must do so quickly. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) suggested a quick way to do so. We may also be able to send aid through northern Kenya. We must get the process going quickly, get ECHO to provide the money and, above all, have the food delivered to the people who need it as quickly as possible. I beg the Government to take emergency action, with all our partners, to enable that to happen.

10.29 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am grateful to previous contributors for keeping their speeches brief, giving me rather more time than I had expected. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on securing this debate. It is an important debate, which ought to extend beyond the normal repertory company of those hon. Members who are interested in international development.

The tragedy is that the debate probably would have extended beyond the Chamber, had it not been for news values that put Zimbabwe in the headlines in the past

[Mr. David Heath]

few days, taking attention away from what is happening in the Horn of Africa. I am afraid that it is a reflection on our society that our view of what should be a priority issue is often dictated by the media. That gives particular value to our opportunity to discuss the issue.

We have had a good debate. My hon. Friend and the hon. Members for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) and for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) have all raised the essential issues in relation to what is happening in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

It is not my objective to criticise the Government. Providing effective aid is difficult, particularly in areas such as the Ogaden, which are inhabited by nomadic peoples. The underlying question is how we provide support for development in a conflict situation. It is a truism that the first casualty of war is truth—the second is civil society, especially its capacity to feed and educate the people and keep them healthy. Such issues come to the fore in every conflict situation. It seems to me, in opposition to the conventional view, that it is even more important to get development aid into those areas, to sustain and, where possible, build on the people's capacity to feed and educate themselves and keep themselves healthy under those circumstances. The attention of Governments, and the resources that are available to them, will, inevitably, be directed elsewhere.

What is the most effective way of providing aid? Is it Government-to-Government aid or multilateral aid to Governments? It almost certainly is not. That is why it is so important to find ways for peoples—rather than Governments—to communicate with each other, using effective NGOs, multilateral organisations, and perhaps even tiers below central Government, to provide effective support.

If the world is to deal effectively with the problem, it must be stopped at source. That means doing something effective to control arms and stop the arms sales that allow conflicts—particularly, but not exclusively, in the continent of Africa—not only to flare up, but to continue, year after sad year, with tragic consequences. Britain is far from blameless. The British Government did not cease the sale of arms to Ethiopia and Eritrea until after the conflict had started. Last February, a British company was found to be organising a shipment of arms to Eritrea—the case is with the Belgian courts at the moment—and Britons are still running guns in the Congo. We must take much more effective action both to control arms on a worldwide basis and to control the activities of arms brokers. We have the same argument about that time and again. The question is, when will it happen and when will effective action will be taken?

My third point relates to the comments of the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), who asked how we should create an effective rapid reaction force. We all pay lip service to that concept and say that the United Nations should be doing more, but what an example the European Union sets with the gross deficiencies of its present arrangements. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I do not think that we should send money to the European Union for this purpose, because far more effective action can be taken by the non-governmental organisations that exist in Britain and the international development teams that the Government have at their disposal. Why on earth should we use a route that has proven time and again to be ineffective and to lack proper urgency?

The constant problem is not merely the quantum of aid in terms of finance and food, but the means of getting it to the affected area. If the world community is to deal effectively with natural catastrophes, or catastrophes that have more than a little to do with the human element—as is the case in Ethiopia—we must have the means of getting goods from one place to another. In the Horn of Africa, east Africa and the whole rim of the Indian ocean, such resources do not exist. It is not that they are not deployed in time; they simply do not exist, and they will not exist until the international community decides that it has to meet the need. It is no good asking our armed forces and our navies to help with such problems in areas that are far from their sphere of influence and from the locations that they usually patrol, which it takes weeks to reach and which they will have the wrong equipment to deal with. That was exactly the problem that the hon. Gentleman experienced in trying to assist in Mozambique, and it will happen time and time again in an area of the world that is prone to natural catastrophe but for which we do not have the resources to meet the need.

I hope that countries that are rich and have the civil and military resources will consider the rim of the Indian ocean and think about how to establish permanent resources to deal with crises in that area. I hope that that is not too utopian a view. Some countries are not always in the lead in providing resources. Indeed, some rich countries that are not a million miles away from the Horn of Africa might be tempted to contribute a little more to establishing a permanent resource that would be available as a contingency.

We can deal with problems in the Mediterranean, which is on our doorsteps. At a push, we can deal with problems in the Caribbean, which is on the doorstep of America and is the focus of some European interests. We can even deal with problems in the far east. However, we cannot help the huge area under discussion, where so little exists and where the countries are so poor. With the best will the world, the Governments in the region are unable to deal with massive acts of God or acts commissioned by man that result in misery and tragedy for so many people. They are rendered powerless to deal with them by a combination of their history, the debt with which they are saddled and other different pressures.

I should like to leave the Minister with that one point. I do not imagine that he has a magic wand that will enable him to achieve those aims, but I ask him to argue seriously for them in the international forums in which he speaks. I hope that Britain can begin to take a lead in these important matters.

10.39 am

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on winning the opportunity to have this debate, which concerns a very important matter. I shall try hard not to duplicate the excellent contributions that have been made. I want to give the Minister plenty of time to answer, which is the purpose of these debates.

It is heartbreaking to see the pictures that have been on television. The Horn of Africa, not merely Ethiopia, is affected. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) that it is foolish to ask what the United Kingdom Government are doing to sort things out, as though they have a magic wand and can be everywhere and do everything. That is unrealistic politics. As I gain more experience in this context, I feel that it would be better for the Government to focus resources in preference to spreading them widely.

I am not saying that the problem is directly our Government's responsibility. The Government of Ethiopia must take primary responsibility for the way in which they spend money and use resources. It is good that we live in a world where more and more people know what is happening around the globe. Through globalisation, multimedia and technology, more and more people in developed countries such as ours find it utterly unacceptable to stand by and watch children die of famine in the 21st century. I welcome the increased involvement in the developed world of millions of ordinary people.

What is happening in Ethiopia shows up some of the fundamental issues with which people involved in development try to work. It highlights the responsibility of Governments. It raises the dilemma of what we should do to help a country whose Government are guilty of corruption and misuse of funds. It brings to our attention the distinction between long-term development and immediate humanitarian aid and the vital question of where the United Kingdom should focus its primary efforts. It leads us to ask how we can dispense essential humanitarian aid during conflict and it focuses our minds on the role and effectiveness of the multilateral agencies.

What we are doing to help resolve the conflict? As the Secretary of State has often said—and I agree—the key to helping a country in conflict is to bring the conflict to an end. That is common sense. Since the end of the cold war, we no longer have so much influence, through the power blocs in the east or west, with Governments in the developing world. The old colonial relationships are falling away. Both those changes are to be welcomed, but they lead us into a vacuum in which we wonder who has the primary responsibility for intervening in the conflict in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Which nation state is seeking the lead role? What are the United Nations, the European Union and the United States doing? I hope that we do not fall between two stools, with no country taking the lead. Perhaps, if aid and development departments are too carefully separated from foreign offices and diplomacy in Governments such as ours, full use will not be made of the leverage that development and aid can supply in bringing Governments to their senses.

What is the United Kingdom Government's policy on dispensing aid to countries in conflict? Simply cutting aid is a short-term and probably wrong-sighted response. Why are we cutting £20 million from our development budget for Ethiopia in the next three years? Would not it be better to suspend payments to the Government if they misuse the money, but to pump the same support through the non-governmental and other bodies that make up civil society there? Many of those bodies can tackle long-term issues such as education, heath care and the strengthening of civil society. I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) that the right response is to pump equivalent support through the NGOs rather than suspend payments to the Government.

How do the Government justify cutting aid to Mozambique—another country in turmoil—in the next three years? I do not understand the decision; I am not sure that the British Government understand it. I would love an answer to the question. Is it not baffling and upsetting that the sum cut from Government support to Mozambique in the next three years equates roughly to the sum given by the British people to the appeal launched some months ago by the charities? If that is the way in which the Government are playing the situation, it is a disturbing trend.

On our response to aid to countries in conflict, how can the Government justify cutting the aid to the Government of Ethiopia while increasing it to the Government of Zimbabwe, which is also a country in conflict? I am not seeking to cause trouble for the Government, I simply do not understand the way in which they justify the move.

The Government may say that they are pumping money into Zimbabwe through the NGOs, as I have called for, but that is not the case. Most of our support to that country goes directly to its Government. Some of it goes to the police force—the same force that is standing by and watching white farmers being beaten and killed. What signal is that sending out? Zimbabwe is involved in conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We are told that 70 per cent. of Zimbabweans are opposed to the involvement. Military equipment worth $200 million has been lost and wasted by the Zimbabwean Government, which is involved in ethnic cleansing. Will the Minister give us an answer today? I have asked several times. How can they justify continuing their support for Zimbabwe while cutting support to Ethiopia?

I want to explore with the Minister the role of multilateral agencies versus nation states. The hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) gave a compelling contribution on the role and performance of the ECHO. *The Independent* yesterday described in detail the EU's procedure for making the decision to send aid that is required before aid can be sent and properly distributed in the right place.

Do we not learn again and again that the response of the United Nations and of the European Union is often deeply disappointing? Are two options not before us? We could put much more energy and attention into trying to improve the performance of the multilateral agencies. I would love to hear what the Department for International Development seeks to do on the matter. What focus are the Minister and the Secretary of State placing on getting a better performance from those organisations? Are the Government concluding, as many of us are, that time and again the response to such crises by nation states far outweighs the performance and response of the multilateral agencies? The difficulty is one of lack of co-ordination. What are the Government doing to improve co-ordination between nation states on situations such as those in Ethiopia and Mozambique?

[Mr. Gary Streeter]

We are told that such situations will arise more and more because of climate change. A key issue in the 21st century will probably be how we decide the way in which to respond. The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) set out a five-point plan for the Government's response to Ethiopia, with which I agreed so much. There is a lack of clarity in the Government's response to the Ethiopian crisis and to countries in conflict generally. Will the Minister bring an end to that confusion and spell out precisely what the Department will do in response to countries in conflict in general and Ethiopia in particular?

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Like everyone else, I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on obtaining this debate, which I welcome, although I would have welcomed a little more time to reply to it.

I take no lessons from the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), the Opposition spokesman. I have been a spokesman on international development for years, but the hon. Gentleman has never asked a question on the matter or taken part in debates on the subject. However, I shall take note of what was said by the hon. Member for Richmond Park and other hon. Members.

It is sad that the debate is necessary. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said, it could have taken place at any time during the past 20 or 30 years. The story is far too familiar. Environmental degradation, military conflict, pressure from a growing population and ill-judged policies are a lethal mix. They bring hunger and misery on a massive scale. As my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) pointed out, the international community's response is in many cases far too slow. We respond to the television pictures, but when the media interest dies down, we return to the same cycle. We should take time to consider the problem in a more measured way and learn from such sad examples as Ethiopia.

Although the food situation is certainly critical in the south and east of Ethiopia, the crisis is not on the same scale as that of 1984-85. That is not only the Government's view; it is what the 15 international non-governmental organisations working in Ethiopia said in their press release in Addis Ababa last week. Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. More than half the population scrapes by on less than $1 a day, and 85 per cent. of the people depend on agriculture for a living. Rural Ethiopia is exceptionally poor. Food insecurity is a common cause of rural poverty.

Every year, between 2 million and 3 million people experience food shortages. That situation has been made worse by the failure of the rains in the past three or four years. The 8 million people who are defined as being at risk are those who live in households with a chronically insecure food supply. Those people are desperately poor. For a large proportion of them—perhaps as many as 5 million—it would not matter whether it rained or not. Their principal problem is not drought but poverty—real, long-term, grinding poverty.

The press release issued last week by the 15 NGOs ended with the statement, with which we agree, that the people of Ethiopia need peace, a subject raised by the hon. Member for South-West Devon. The Algerian presidency is trying to resolve the conflict on behalf of the Organisation of African Unity. The President of Algeria has invited the Foreign Ministers of Ethiopia and Eritrea to Algiers in the coming weeks for further discussions. We and our international partners continue fully to support the efforts of the OAU. We have urged both sides—I now do so again—to co-operate with the OAU mediators to end that futile conflict immediately.

The 15 NGOs' also suggested that more development was needed and that debt relief was necessary. How true that is. Food aid will not lift those 8 million people out of their long-term, chronic poverty: sustainable economic and social development will. The Government of Ethiopia know that; indeed, they have made good progress since they came to power in 1991. That success has attracted substantial support from the international community. The tragedy is that the war with Eritrea has seriously affected Ethiopia's economic and social progress. We cannot dismiss that as though it were unimportant.

I shall cite some statistics that were not previously available. Comparing the current financial year with the period from 1995-96 to 1997-98, recurrent expenditure on defence has almost tripled as a percentage of gross domestic product. At the same time, expenditure in the social sector fell from 3.7 per cent. to 3.4 per cent. of GDP. More worrying is the fact that capital expenditure in the social sector—investment for the future in schools and health centres—has dropped by a third during the past two years. Domestic borrowing has risen and external reserves have halved.

Those figures highlight the unsustainability of the military conflict, which has caused dialogue between the International Monetary Fund and Ethiopia to break down. External assistance has, sadly, been reduced and grant financing by donors has been halved. It is difficult to estimate how much aid the Government have lost as a result of the war, but a good estimate is between £90 million and £165 million. That is all the more serious and regrettable because, in the pre-war period, public expenditure was becoming poverty-focused.

Hon. Members mentioned working with NGOs. We continue to provide support for NGOs. We are involved in programmes with Farm Africa—I, too, welcome the Speaker's initiative on that—and SOS Sahel and the affiliated regions. But hon. Members, especially mems of the Select Committee, know that to create real change, we need to work directly with Governments who have pro-poor policies. If they do not, we work around them with the NGOs. The two approaches are not in conflict; they are complementary with good governance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley mentioned debt. The war has had an effect on Ethiopia's access to debt relief. Britain has taken the lead on obtaining debt relief for countries such as Ethiopia. It should have reached its heavily indebted poor countries decision point by now. Sadly, however, it is unlikely to do so this year, even if it quickly resumes its dialogue with the IMF. Its payments to service the debt will consume resources that could and should be spent on

the poor—the very people we have heard described today and who we see on our television screens. That is another calamity of that unnecessary war.

The war has also affected the relief effort. The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) referred to logistics in his helpful contribution. Unlike the hon. Member for South-West Devon, he understands what it is like to be in government. The war has diverted trucking capacity and increased costs by making grazing land inaccessible, denying rural households additional income sources in Eritrea and denying access to the ports of Massawa and Assab in Eritrea. The Ethiopian Government have argued that the ports are not well placed to help with the relief effort. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley said, how can it be easier to manage a relief operation through two ports—Djibouti and Berbera—rather than four? It defies logic.

An international effort is under way to bring help to Ethiopia. Some 85,000 tonnes of food was brought into the country in the first quarter of the year. Substantial pledges have been made—433,000 tonnes from the European Community for this year and a further 110,000 tonnes by June next year to help replenish the emergency food security reserve, which we helped to establish. The hon. Member for Banbury rightly said that we pay 17 per cent. of the cost of that package. Total pledges are adequate to cover existing food requirements, but they need to reach the people in need quickly. We are providing more assistance and pressing the EC to speed up its procedures to move food quickly. Some 30,000 tonnes was delivered through Djibouti last week. The assistance is arriving.

We also need to remind the Ethiopian Government of the need to play their part. I welcome their pledge to provide 100,000 tonnes of food aid, but only 7,000 tonnes has been delivered and none to the hungry of the Somali region. Food shortages have been exacerbated by drought, but they have not been caused by drought alone. In fact, 1999 was the third best agricultural production year in Ethiopia's history. The main rains last year were good, and wheat and pulse production figures were high. Could not the Ethiopian Government have taken the opportunity to provide food aid to those areas where the rains have failed in successive years to help those communities cope?

An importance governance issue is involved, as hon. Members said. Is it reasonable to blame the international community alone? Of course we have a responsibility, but we cannot be blamed for the plight of so many of Ethiopia's people. Their Government also have a responsibility. It is not true that we have cut humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia because of the war. We see humanitarian assistance not as a carrot but as something that must be provided. Like all other major donors, we have reduced long-term development assistance, but we would like it to be restored. When a successful peace deal is achieved in Ethiopia, we will continue our long-term development assistance to Ethiopia and Eritrea.

If I had more time, I would respond to the questions asked by several hon. Members and explain why the hon. Member for South-West Devon is, as usual, completely misguided about Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Maternity Care

11 am

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to discuss with colleagues the implementation of good practice in maternity care. First, I must declare an interest as an honorary vice-president of the Royal College of Midwives, a position that I hold with great pleasure and pride. As many hon. Members will be aware, in 1991 and 1992 I had the honour and privilege to chair the Select Committee on Health when it undertook an in-depth inquiry into maternity services. As the Select Committee's 1992 report says, the inquiry was instigated,

> by hearing many voices saying that all is not well with the maternity services and that women have needs which are not being met.

Paragraph 33 of the report says:

> Given the absence of conclusive evidence, it is no longer acceptable that the pattern of maternity care provision should be driven by presumptions about the applicability of a medical model of care based on unproven assertions.

It would be proper for me to pay public tribute to the Select Committee's advisers who were: Caroline Flint, a well-known independent midwife; Mrs. Rosemary Jenkins of the Royal College of Midwives; Dr. Naren Patel, consultant obstetrician at Ninewells hospital, Dundee; Professor Osmund Reynolds, a close personal friend for many years, who was Professor of neo-natal paediatrics at University college and Middlesex school of medicine; Professor Philip Steer, Professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Charing Cross and Westminster medical school; and another personal friend, Dr. Luke Zander, senior lecturer in the department of general practice at the United Medical and Dental School of Guy's and St. Thomas's.

All those people were vital to the production of the Committee's report. I should like to express my appreciation, these many years later, for the tremendous support that I received during the inquiry as Chairman of that Committee from all Committee members. To mention just one, the hon. Member for Preston (Audrey Wise) was, with me, the driving force behind the inquiry. I hope that hon. Members will allow me to say that I wish the hon. Lady, who is in hospital at the moment, a full and speedy recovery.

The future reconfiguration of maternity units is currently under discussion, which I believe provides an opportunity to reshape the provision of maternity care in the United Kingdom. Where trust mergers are unavoidable, resources must be directed in such a way as to enhance the quality of maternity care. This is an opportunity for the Government to act on the growing research evidence that demonstrates the huge advantages of midwifery-centred care in the provision of maternity services.

Following the Health Committee report in 1992, an expert committee chaired by Baroness Cumberlege, a health Minister at the time, considered the implications of the Health Committee's recommendations. In due course a report called "Changing Childbirth" was published, setting targets for implementation and recommendations for good practice. On page 1, the report said:

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The Select Committee concluded that a medical model of care should no longer drive the service and that women should be given unbiased information and an opportunity for choice in the type of maternity care they receive, including the option, previously largely denied to them, of having their babies at home or in small maternity units.

As the Chamber knows, "Changing Childbirth" became policy for the maternity services in England in 1994 and remains the policy today.

The report called for fundamental changes in the maternity services, based on three principles—the importance of involving women in making informed decisions about their care, making maternity services accessible and attractive to all women and having public involvement in the monitoring and planning of maternity services. A key to putting those principles into practice was reinstating more autonomous midwifery practice and enabling midwives to provide continuity of care. Time and again when we were taking evidence from mothers to be, they talked about the importance of the continuity of care—having women cared for by a named midwife through the whole of pregnancy, for labour and birth, when possible, and in the early weeks following birth. It was recommended that midwives be organised into small groups, working between community and hospital. An explicit target was to have 75 per cent. of women cared for by a midwife whom they have got to know for labour and birth. That is something that I feel strongly about, as did the Health Committee at the time.

The Royal College of Midwives has supported "Changing Childbirth" since its publication and throughout its implementation and remains committed to the principle of a woman-centred care structure. It is no longer appropriate for maternity care to be for the convenience of consultants and doctors; it is there for the mothers and babies.

In a new year press release, the Minister for Public Health stated:

Maternity services are at the heart of the service that women and babies of this country want and deserve.

In the opinion of some of the user organisations, this is now an issue not of choice but of public health. In the nearly 11 years since "Changing Childbirth" was published, maternity care has, sadly, not moved towards the ideals embodied in the report. Indeed, and I say this with some regret, for most women the likelihood of a normal birth with a known midwife is even less now. The centralisation and medicalisation of birth in large obstetric units has intensified rather than declined. Caesarean section rates since "Changing Childbirth" have increased to over 30 per cent. in some hospitals and have recently shown signs of rising still further. This is a major cause for concern.

Full implementation of "Changing Childbirth" depended to a large extent on good midwifery practice. With the severe shortage of midwives, many of the excellent pilot schemes that were originally set up have failed to continue. The latest statistical analysis of the register of the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting reveals that there are 33,897 practising midwives and a further 58,286 who are registered but not practising. That is a lamentable waste of skills and talent.

Sadly, since 1994, the quality of maternity care has deteriorated. Consumer groups, including one for which I have the greatest regard, the Association for Improvements in Maternity Service, which is known affectionately as AIMS and is chaired by that splendid lady, Beverley Beech, is reporting many more serious complaints from all over the country. It attributes them to a reduction in midwifery staff, particularly in the more senior midwifery grades—it is worth emphasising that. At the same time, it is reporting many letters from former midwives who have left the service in despair because they were not allowed to practice normal midwifery and provide the normal births for which they had been trained. Instead, many became obstetric nurses in high-tech hospital units.

Caesarean sections are a matter that causes considerable concern. Some obstetricians now provide caesarean sections on request for women with no medical reason to have them, thereby adding to the risk to both mother and child as well as to national health service costs. At the same time, NHS trusts are failing to provide proper care for those women who want and should have a normal birth. Delivery by caesarean section carries a higher risk, as I am sure that many hon. Members know—not least among them the Minister—for both mother and baby. The mother has a slower rate of recovery, a reduced chance of successful breastfeeding, an increased need for post-natal care—which, sadly, is in short supply—and a greater risk of complications.

One of the major risks of caesarean section comes with the birth of the next child and any subsequent children. The mother has a greater risk of placenta praevia when the placenta blocks the outlet, leading to haemorrhage, an increased risk of the placenta becoming embedded in the wall of the uterus, and the risk of life-threatening haemorrhage when an attempt is made to remove it. There has been an increase in emergency hysterectomies carried out after birth to save the life of the mother who has had one or more caesarean sections for previous births. If those caesarean sections were unnecessary, surely the resulting problems are a high price to pay. Ironically, medical litigation costs the NHS more than £300 million every year and obstetric claims account for more than 50 per cent. of that total.

Good practice is the provision of a service that allows women who wish to have a normal labour and delivery without medical assistance to do so. There is now ample medical evidence that normal births at home are at least as safe as hospital births. However, it is rare for women to receive clear, unbiased advice—I say that with fervour—or to be able to choose where to give birth to their babies. Women are not told of the risks of hospital births, but the risks of home birth, both real and imagined, are heavily stressed by the medical profession. AIMS receives calls daily from women who want to give birth at home but are being persuaded into accepting a hospital birth and now that the midwifery shortage is acute, staff are telling mothers, "Should there be a staff shortage in the hospital when you go into labour you will have to come into the hospital."

I turn to midwifery education. The centralisation and medicalisation of birth in large obstetric units has resulted in a significant group of midwives who are not confident of supporting a woman who wants a normal

physiological birth. They can only offer drugs for pain relief and are stressed by caring for a woman who is not immobilised by a foetal heart monitor and connected to an epidural. In a recent AIMS journal, a non-practising midwife, deploring the decline in good skilled midwifery practice, commented that student midwives learn good theory in the classrooms, but bad practice in the wards of our hospitals. AIMS hears from an increasing number of student midwives who say that, although they are nearing the end of their training, they have not witnessed a normal physiological birth. Is that not extraordinary? Surely there is something wrong with a system that allows that to happen.

At Chelsea and Westminster hospital, 80 per cent. of pregnant women are given epidural anaesthesia. As a result, student midwives are unable to understand and support a woman in normal labour. Such women behave very differently from those who are given epidurals. Because of that training failure, midwives no longer understand the natural progression of labour in a normal, unmedicated physiological birth. Indeed, AIMS files bulge with reports of the strategies adopted by many midwives to persuade women who had home births to give birth in hospital.

What is the way forward? The Royal College of Midwives wants maternity services to be orientated around primary care, and the use of midwifery-led units to be increased. Examples of successful units include Trowbridge hospital—which is part of Wiltshire Health Care NHS trust—where more than 600 deliveries a year take place. In inquiring into maternity services, members of the Health Committee visited that hospital. The Edgware birth centre recently presented the findings of its two-year project in an evaluation report.

Hospitals in which team midwifery has excelled include Bolton hospital—again, in my own part of the country—which is part of Bolton Hospitals NHS trust. At the Crewe health centre—which is even closer to my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), and is part of the Cheshire Community Healthcare NHS trust—the caesarean section rate has been reduced significantly. I applaud that statistic, the hospital, the midwives and other clinicians involved at Leighton hospital.

The current shortage of midwives in maternity units is a problem in terms of recruitment and retention. If depreciation in services is to be avoided, that shortage must be addressed by health authorities and, if I may say so, the Minister in particular. Education and training must also be emphasised. Salford provides a good example of a comprehensive training school. Students there experience deliveries from a variety of backgrounds. The recent practice of recruiting consultant midwives is an encouraging development that should be extended throughout the United Kingdom. If the theoretical training of student midwives is to be reinforced and supported, they must be provided with a thorough grounding and understanding of normal birth.

The education system should be linked to stand-alone midwifery birth centres, and I hope that the Minister will comment on that. A community-based service that supports case-load midwifery was introduced in Professor Lesley Page's one-to-one midwifery care scheme. I have met Professor Page and I have the greatest respect for her. Her contribution to maternity services is outstanding.

The Minister and hon. Members will know that one-to-one midwifery was established in November 1993 in the Hammersmith Hospitals NHS trust, at Queen Charlotte's and Chelsea hospital, and Hammersmith hospital, so that the "Changing Childbirth" principles could be put into practice. Each midwife has a case load of 40 women. Sensibly, each works with a partner and, so that they can cover holidays and so forth, they get to know the women in each other's case load. Partnerships are organised in group practices of six to eight midwives, which allows allocation of case load, mutual support and a forum for peer review of practice. Again, those are sound procedures. The one-to-one midwives survey geographical catchment area includes low and high-risk women. If the woman's pregnancy is low risk, the midwife manages the care, but if it is high risk, an obstetrician does so, although, importantly, the one-to-one midwife will continue to provide midwifery care.

The education system should be linked to a home birth service in which all midwives are supported and enabled to practise autonomously, should they wish to do so. For many years, midwives in independent practice have been able to provide a high-quality service for the women whom they attend—they are often high-risk women who are unwilling to have a second hospital birth. In order to practise autonomously and to fulfil their role to its fullest extent, those midwives have had to practise independently and, sadly, outside the NHS. It is time that their contribution to maternal and child health was recognised and those dedicated midwives were supported within our splendid NHS. The situation in New Zealand shows that an independent model in the health service would enable all women—not simply those who can afford the fees or those for whom the midwives provide charitable care without payment—to benefit from real choice, control over their body and continuity of care. That restructuring of care would enable obstetricians to focus on and develop quality of care for high-risk women and those who choose to give birth in a high-tech unit.

Several initiatives have had excellent outcomes, including the one-to-one midwifery practice, which I discussed earlier, and the Edgware birth centre. During the two-year evaluation period between 1 September 1997 and 31 August 1999, 387 women had their babies at the centre, which was in line with the targets that had been set. In that period, 727 women booked into the centre; 19.4 per cent. transferred ante-natally and 12 per cent. transferred during labour.

I am delighted to say that women who planned to deliver at the birth centre during the evaluation period recorded very high levels of maternal satisfaction, which is crucial when women give birth. They also had need of far fewer interventions than women who were in the same risk category but who delivered in hospital.

I hope that the Minister will bear with me while I give some statistics. In relation to planned caesareans among low-risk women, there were interventions in 3.3 per cent. of cases in local hospitals and in only 0.3 per cent. of cases in birth centres. The national figure, which includes all women and covers the period 1996-97, was 8 per cent.

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In relation to inductions among low-risk women, there were interventions in 16.8 per cent. of cases in local hospitals and in 7.3 per cent. of cases in birth centres, which is significantly lower. The national figure, which includes all women and covers the period 1996-97, was 20 per cent.

In relation to epidurals among low-risk women, there were interventions in 30.7 per cent. of cases in local hospitals and in only 11.4 per cent. of cases in birth centres. The national figure was 19 per cent.

In relation to episiotomies among low-risk women, there were interventions in 18.9 per cent. of cases in local hospitals and in only 5.1 per cent. of cases in birth centres. The national figure was 20 per cent.

In relation to the use of forceps among low-risk women, there were interventions in 5.1 per cent. of cases in local hospitals—the figure for the use of the ventouse in that category was 9.5 per cent.—and in birth centres the relevant figure was 2 per cent. for forceps and just 1.9 per cent. for the ventouse, which is the vacuum extractor procedure. The national figure was 11 per cent. Some of those figures were provided by the Department of Health.

In addition, women who delivered at the birth centre had labours that were on average 15 per cent. shorter than the labours of similar low-risk women who delivered in local hospitals. Much less use was made of clinical anaesthesia such as pethidine. Remarkably, 50 per cent. of babies born at the centre during the evaluation period were born in water.

The cost of deliveries at the birth centre was significantly cheaper—by up to 30 per cent.—than that for similar women delivering in hospitals.

The research and evaluation has some limitations—the comparatively small sample, the difficulty of obtaining comprehensive and accurate financial information, the lack of information about women who choose not to book at the centre, and the fact that the research was done at the start of the birth centre project.

Another practice that I am sure is well known to the Department and the Minister is the Albany midwifery practice. The practice's costs are £180,000 for the midwifery care of 2,316 women, of whom 47 per cent. are Caucasian and 53 per cent. black African, Vietnamese or Asian. The home birth rate is 37 per cent. The rate for non-pharmacological analgesia is 65 per cent. The rate for spontaneous vaginal delivery is very high, at 78.9 per cent. The rate for intact perineum is 63.5 per cent—that is very important to women. At four weeks, 74 per cent. of women were breastfeeding.

For those who do not know, I shall explain the history of the south-east London midwifery group practice, which I shall call the Albany practice. It was established in 1994 as a self-employed, self-managed group of midwives and a practice manager. The aim of the group is to provide continuity of midwifery care to local women—ante-natally, during the intra-partum period and post-natally—with known midwives, with a policy of targeting certain groups and promoting equity of access, thereby meeting the objectives of "Changing Childbirth".

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I am very impressed by the Albany statistics. Can the hon. Gentleman tell me whether the 26.5 per cent. of patients that did not have intact perineums had episiotomies or perineal tears? Earlier, he said that the episiotomy rate at the Edgware birth centre is extraordinarily low—much lower than the rate for intact perineums that he quoted for Albany.

Mr. Winterton: I respect the hon. Gentleman for his professional knowledge. I cannot immediately give him an answer, but I shall certainly ascertain that statistic and come back to him. It is a relevant question, and I am sorry that I am not currently in a position to respond to it.

The Albany practice secured direct funding from the health commission to provide midwifery care for 130 women a year. The group also looked after a further 20 women from the Greenwich area. The mode of care offered quickly proved to be extremely popular with women, and the group's work soon became nationally and internationally acclaimed as ground-breaking. It is still valued as an important resource for all those who are interested in that type of innovative midwifery practice.

Towards the end of 1996, despite its success, the Albany practice was under serious threat. It became apparent that the health authority could not readily make funds available for it to continue. Having always had positive connections with King's college hospital—with especially strong support from Cathy Warwick, the director of midwifery—the practice proposed a sub-contract with King's health care trust.

Although that would inevitably mean losing some of its autonomy, the group felt that it would be worth while in view of the potential of such collaboration. I am pleased to report that the health authority was supportive of such a solution and agreed to contribute to the funding required for the new approach. In the light of the practice's excellent outcomes and predicted cost-effectiveness and health gain among the local population, both parties are hopeful about the effects of making the Albany practice midwifery model part of what I would describe as midwifery mainstream. The proposal would also relieve some of the pressure imposed by long-term midwifery vacancies at King's college hospital.

The Minister will know that the Albany practice is one of eight midwifery group practices at King's. The group comprises seven midwives and a practice manager based at the Peckham Pulse and it is self-employed and self-managed. A sub-contract has been negotiated between King's and the Albany practice to provide maternity care for women in and around Peckham. I am sure that that is of great interest to a friend of the Minister's, the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). The case load is generated by four local general practitioners, some self-referrals and some referrals from consultant obstetricians at King's.

The Albany midwifery practice offers women-centred care, as recommended by the "Changing Childbirth" maternity group. The practice offers continuity of midwifery care with two known midwives for each woman. It provides ante-natal, post-natal and intra-partum care. I believe that the Albany practice is unique in the United Kingdom, but I hope that that uniqueness is quickly lost and that its example can spread throughout the country.

The House and women owe a great deal to the Health Committee report and to the subsequent work of Baroness Cumberlege. It is important that maternity services in Britain are focused on the mother and the baby. Doctors have a role to play, but care should no longer be organised around doctors, obstetricians, gynaecologists and the medical profession. It should be a service specifically for mothers and babies, in which midwives have a pivotal role to play. I am delighted to be associated with them and I hope that the Minister will respond positively to my concerns.

11.30 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) for putting the case so fluently, in his own inimitable way. It is good to see that the Minister for Public Health is present to respond, as well as her shadow counterpart, the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman).

I want to speak almost entirely about the midwife-led aspect of maternity care. I was born through caesarean section, through no fault of my own, and I know what an important aspect of care midwifery is. Stroud has a midwife unit that is one of only two remaining units in the south-west. It was under threat of closure some two or so years ago, which is why I have spoken on these matters in a debate on national health service maternity services that was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) in the House on 11 February 1998. I do not want to repeat the arguments that were rehearsed in that pertinent debate.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield was Chairman of the Health Committee when the seminal document "Changing Childbirth" was published in 1993. I make no apology for repeating, rather than stealing or plagiarising, an important part of that document, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree in the debate in February 1998. The key element is choice. He quoted a passage that I shall quote again now, because it is so important. The Committee said:

> We recommend that the policy of closing small rural maternity units on presumptive grounds of safety be abandoned forthwith. We further recommend that no decision be taken to close such a unit unless it can be explicitly and incontrovertibly demonstrated that they are failing to provide value for money and that the costs to the consumers are carefully taken into account in making such calculations. We recommend that in considering an appeal against the closure of such a unit, the Secretary of State should make presumption against closure unless the case is overwhelming, since we believe that there is a shift in attitude towards maternity care which can only be met by maintaining such units as a realistically available option.

Choice is the keynote of the debate, and that was borne out in the "Changing Childbirth" report. The issue is one of disseminating best practice and keeping maternity care as local as possible. The size of units is also important. Within reason, women want smaller units for pre-natal and intra-partum care, but also post-natally, including perhaps transferring from a district general hospital when they want to be closer to family and friends.

My contribution to the debate in 1998 was to argue strongly for midwife-led services in Stroud to continue. The *Stroud News and Journal* led an effective campaign, which I was happy to support. Our proposal involved saving £150,000 from a budget of £248 million, which puts the matter in perspective. We wanted to show that women and families supported the continued operation of the unit in Stroud. That was partly due to its being part of a much larger operation in Stroud hospital, which has become a centre of excellence. I thank the Government for the recent upgrading of the accident and emergency department in Stroud. It seems important to have the appropriate range of services across the age range. There is an important development in elderly people's care on the hospital site, and it is important to keep the maternity unit there. In 1993, when "Changing Childbirth" was published, the unit was refurbished and was reopened by Dr. Mark Porter—some hon. Members know him—a constituent of mine who is known to me personally.

During the debate in February 1998, the then Under-Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), promised that proper consultation would always take place on any proposal to close a unit, that the presumption would be against closure and that the Government would support best practice and new initiatives.

In discussing the two remaining threats I shall refer to a review document that I have just obtained. The two threats seem to be the economic case for further centralisation and medical opinion. The Government deserve praise for the money that they made available to my area's health authority in the Budget, and the commensurate changes made at the time, which have lifted the pall that was over the authority. However, a value for money argument can be made, and we cannot ignore it. Even so, very small sums are involved in relation to the overall budget.

When we last discussed the Stroud midwife-led maternity unit, it was decided to keep it open but to review it regularly. The latest 18-month review has just been completed. We did not talk explicitly about the cost, because that is a matter for the seven NHS trusts and the health authority. A more difficult problem was that of medical opinion. The hon. Member for Macclesfield made it clear that obstetricians and other specialists still continue to argue in favour of babies being delivered in district general hospital units.

I am not taking a dig at the GPs in my area, but they are generally somewhat ambivalent towards a local midwife-led service. That does not help, because most women will take their GP's advice when they receive the happy news that they are pregnant. If GPs gave a more positive response, on safety and the right to choose, we would have every reason to keep midwife-led units open. The risk factor is slight, but in difficult cases, Stroud is not a million miles away from consultant-led units in the district general hospitals at Gloucester or Cheltenham. We can have the best of both worlds. I hope that GPs and consultants will continue to listen.

The three keynote terms in the 1993 report and today's are the need for a service that is comprehensive, flexible and based on choice. The current review is now completed. The target was 350 births a year. That is difficult to reach; although the number of births has increased, it must be set against an overall decline. We are trying to go against the tide.

[Mr. David Drew]

If complications arise, cases will inevitably be transferred to the district general hospital, which will reduce the number of women using the local midwife-led unit. Indeed, there is always pressure to go for the safe solution. I did not go for that option: two of my children, Laurence and Christopher, were born in Stroud maternity hospital. Esther was born at home with the help of the midwife service run from Stroud. I have personal experience of the quality of care and the personal service offered by the midwife service.

I do not wish to mix statistics with the hon. Member for Macclesfield—he left me for dead with his—but I have no reason to doubt their importance. The number of births each month can vary. For instance, in December 1998 there were only 13; last month, there were 27. That is obviously going in the right direction, but variations can occur. Transfers back to the midwife-led unit for ante-natal and post-natal care are somewhat unpredictable. However, such variations are inevitable because childbirth has yet to be completely sanitised. Long may that continue.

Some significant improvements have taken place. We now have the support of paediatricians at Gloucester Royal hospital. That has led to the drawing up of a protocol which shows that there is a belief that the service in Stroud is safe, that it has a high quality threshold and that it is popular. Much has been done to publicise the service and to show women in the area that it is open for business. The service wants to make itself known to as many people as possible. The fact remains, however, that GPs are not always as helpful as they might be. Anything that I can do to persuade them otherwise is important.

There is good support from the National Childbirth Trust, the league of friends of the hospital and the ladies circle that works with the league of friends. We are not yet at the threshold of 350 births a year. I hope that that will not be used as an opportunity to revisit the usual response—difficult meetings with officials—with many people being angry that their wonderful and well-loved service was threatened.

Much is happening. There are many initiatives. One of our midwives—Helen Conway—is well known to me. She is in China learning about different ways of delivering and the use of acupuncture. Anyone who knows Stroud will be aware that we are very alternative there. I probably have more acupuncturists than general practitioners in my constituency. Acupuncture provision will fit centrally into what women seem to want.

I want from my hon. Friend the Minister a clear statement that there is a future for midwife-led units, that they are safe and that they should be there to respond to the choice that women wish to exercise. I want her to pass on my message to the local trust that we do not want to revisit the possible closure of the unit. Such threats lead to great public aggravation and take us no further forward. I want to hear that the costings, which are not as important as the medical opinion, can be put in place to show that the staff have a future. The staff may then breathe a sigh of relief and the women and families of the area may then be given the services that they so clearly want, not only in the local midwife-led unit but at the district general hospital. The choice must always be there for people.

11. 46 am

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I hesitate to contribute to the debate, as a man and, worse, a doctor with a qualification from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The college appears to be the baddie of the debate.

"Changing Childbirth" was a seminal document. It was important because it recognised that childbirth had changed over the years. When I first saw the title I thought that it was ridiculous. Women have always had babies and, other than Pallas Athene, who was delivered through an especially unusual route, they have had them vaginally or by caesarean section.

We have moved too far towards technical intervention in childbirth. However, I would like to remind the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who spoke with great depth of feeling about the benefits of natural childbirth, that natural childbirth can also result in a high rate of dead or handicapped babies. It can result in significant mutilation of mothers with subsequent obstetric disasters and perhaps, even more sadly for them, incontinence, which is extremely difficult to treat. One need only consider what happens in the third world, where nature is all that people can fall back on, to understand that natural childbirth does not deliver an especially good service. Whatever we discuss with regard to maternity care, we must not deny that nature needs professional and high-quality help.

I am as one with the hon. Member for Macclesfield in saying that the approach should be woman-centred. I was pleased that he acknowledged later in his contribution the importance of the baby. He was right to say that we need a personal service for women. Childbirth can be the most wonderful experience, not only for the woman having the baby and the family concerned but for the other people involved in the birth. The experience can also be hairy and frightening when things unexpectedly go wrong and get slightly messy. Whatever model we adopt, we must ensure the flexibility to which the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) referred.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman and, although it is early in his speech, he has not so far mentioned midwives. The midwife is a qualified professional, and if there is continuity of care, the mother to be can be provided with the confidence and expertise to have a normal birth. Midwives are professionals, and if it becomes necessary to involve a consultant, they will immediately pass over the case. However, the midwife can provide the continuity that is so essential to the woman in giving birth.

Dr. Brand: I am grateful for that intervention. The hon. Gentleman anticipated my next point. Professional help is required, and the lead professionals in this area are midwives. The expertise and time of midwives can make an enormous contribution to a normal delivery. I have no doubt that women who are well looked after, who feel relaxed and are confident of the support of someone they know, have much better births and the

process is much more positive. I agree with the hon. Member for Macclesfield that there is evidence that women who are relaxed and confident need less anaesthesia, but I do not agree that it is necessarily a bad thing for a woman to choose to have analgesia. At times during his speech, I thought that we were listening to the critics of Queen Victoria, who indulged in artificial anaesthetics during some of her many deliveries.

The essence of my remarks is that giving birth is the province of midwives. The setting for giving birth should be the personal choice of the woman who is having the baby, but in promoting home deliveries, which are the most satisfying part of one's career, it is important to remember that they can be carried out only if there are experienced midwives in sufficient number. Otherwise, one might find that no one is available, except a midwife 30 miles away whom the mother has never met, which destroys the whole idea of continuity of care.

It is also essential that a second pair of hands is available at the time of birth in case there are problems with the baby. It is essential that someone at the birth can intubate the baby if required. It is also essential that the home circumstances can be enhanced if necessary. One of the reasons why the Dutch have much better statistics than we do is that they provide social support in the later stages of pregnancy, which makes an enormous contribution. It is also vital that there should be ready access to a flying squad. I am one of the wicked GPs who dissuaded people from having their babies at home because it took about one hour for a flying squad to arrive. That is a complete waste of time, and a flying squad should include someone with obstetric experience as well as an anaesthetist.

We heard some good stories from the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). I had the privilege of witnessing the birth of both of my sons, but they were born in hospital. One of them would not have survived at home, and my wife would not have survived if she had been at home when she gave birth to the other. We must put this in perspective. Home deliveries require an adequate standard of professionalism at the home and back-up by the hospital unit. There should also be the option of the midwife transferring the mother to a midwife unit within the hospital or to an obstetric unit run by a consultant. We have made progress on that. The Cumberlege report was a bombshell for most obstetricians who withdrew into a professional laager saying, "The world will now stop." They realised that they had underestimated the professional capacity and capability of midwives and had overestimated their own importance in women's minds. Patients are sensible and pick who suits them best.

If we are to continue to extend the role of midwives, which is a positive approach, we need to do something about their training, as the hon. Member for Macclesfield said. We must also allow them to have a decent career structure. It is unacceptable for a qualified midwife to be employed at a D or E grade. That is what drives them out of the national health service. When we consider different patterns of deliveries—I was impressed by the statistics for the Edgware birth centre and the Albany unit—we must ensure that we compare like with like. Innovative units attract a different section of the population than a district general hospital, which is used by a more average part of the population. A pre-selected group might produce different outcomes.

The Health Committee last year, or possibly the year before, considered caesarean section rates published by the NHS executive. I asked how many home deliveries had occurred in the district for which the rates were being given, but that figure was not known. If 30 per cent. of normal babies are being born at home rather than in a hospital unit, it is obvious that caesareans are being performed on a different section of the population. We need to be clever with statistics because they can be used in different ways.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield mentioned the role of independent midwives. I have no problem with independent midwives, but they need to function within a framework that provides the full back-up that is available to other midwives. They must also accept clinical governance. I am afraid that independent midwives are sometimes reluctant to have their figures queried. It is not good enough to rely on high-profile press reports when something goes disastrously wrong. They should be licensed and have their competence evaluated, which should also happen to general practitioners. I hope that that will be part of the accreditation system. It is unacceptable for GPs to be on an intra-partum obstetric list if they are not involved in intra-partum care. It is unfair—and silly—to call out a practitioner who has not delivered a baby for two years to deal with a complication that is being handled by a professional who probably manages 100 deliveries a year. We need an ante-partum list and, with the right education, post-natal care will look after itself.

I am glad that we have had this debate. Not only is the way in which childbirth is being managed changing all the time, but so is the population that is giving birth. We must remember that women are now much older when they have their first baby. Again, I have some problem with the promotion of natural childbirth at all costs. We must consider the mother's age. It is rather rude to talk about elderly primates. The age used to be over 35; I think that it has now been raised to 40. There is no doubt that women have babies much more easily in their early 20s or late teens than in their late 30s or early 40s. It would be foolish to encourage people to take a completely natural route if any complications were envisaged.

Mr. Winterton: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the mother to be should make that choice—I accept with the best advice? To date the clinician has too often left no choice. Those who support the views that I have expressed want the mother to be to make that choice, but from a position of knowledge, if there are complications.

Dr. Brand: Of course the woman should make the choice, but it should be an informed choice and one that takes into account the outcome of the process—the baby. I do not accept that it is necessarily bad practice to have a high rate of epidurals, to offer analgesia or to have foetal monitoring, whether in the home or in hospital. If we are to screen out higher-risk procedures and anticipate events, the safest way to shift a baby to a place of safety is in the mother's womb, and not attached to something else.

Technology should help natural childbirth; we should not look to it as an alternative.

12.1 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I congratulate the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on securing this important debate and drawing attention to the Health Committee's work on this issue. I found it particularly interesting to hear all the information about the Edgware birth centre. When that is on the record, many more people will be aware of its interesting statistics.

I know that the Minister for Public Health gives midwifery a high priority, because in her new year message she said that maternity services were at the heart of Government. She perhaps knew at the time just how important that would be to those in government. Indeed, we wish the Prime Minister and his wife all the best in their imminent happy event.

For all the fine words, there is a gathering crisis in midwifery when a third of all trusts cannot provide one-to-one care for a woman. There is nothing more terrifying for a woman who is in labour, perhaps for the first time, than when the midwife leaves the room. Although I have no information to support my theory, I suspect that such non-attendance occurs more often in an institutional setting than at home, when, by definition, the midwife has to be there. At such times, prospective parents feel very vulnerable if they are left alone with the incessant bleeping of the foetal monitor. It is just the sort of thing that "Changing Childbirth" was designed to avoid. I am pleased that hon. Members on all sides have paid tribute to the work of Baroness Cumberlege in producing that document, which is a seminal work. All of us are united in wanting to see it implemented.

It is essential to quantify the extent of the crisis. The Royal College of Midwives survey shows that three out of four midwifery units carry vacancies and that the number of long-term vacancies has risen to 55 per cent. of all vacant posts. That translates into a shortfall in absolute terms of 1,000 full-time midwives. There is no doubting the strong sense of vocation that midwives feel, but their morale is not good at present. That is not hearsay; the facts speak for themselves. Only 36 per cent. of registered midwives are practising today and the number of students entering midwifery education is falling. Several hon. Members have suggested reasons for that.

I echo the view that there should be a review of the salary structure in midwifery. Nurses' pay has increased, especially at the upper end, but midwives often find that their wage levels reach a plateau, despite years of experience in midwifery that should be recognised. Midwives, by definition, travel a great deal as part of their work and a further aggravation is that their mileage allowance remains very low. In order not to sound hypocritical, I should point out that it is less than half that of a Member of Parliament.

The recruitment and retention problems are not only due to pay levels. The number of vacancies has a bearing on working conditions. When vacancies are not filled, those who remain must carry a greater load. The average shortage of midwives is 2 per cent., but that disguises big regional variations, especially in the London catchment area where competing salaries make retention even more difficult. In the North Thames area, the vacancy rate is 5.9 per cent., and in South Thames it is 6.1 per cent. Those figures are significantly above the national average.

Some of the low morale is related to the erosion of the status of the profession. Midwives feel that the integrity of their profession has been compromised by the fact that they are now trained jointly with nurses for much of their preparation for practice. Respect for that practice is undermined by forcing midwives to join nurses in studying courses that are not relevant to midwifery—for example, courses designed to train nurses in the early detection of the signs of dementia. That is unlikely to be relevant to women of childbearing age. They may become demented during labour but it is not a permanent condition.

Another factor that has a bearing on the crisis in midwifery is the shortage of consultant posts in obstetrics. That is a piece of NHS mismanagement of the first order. In response to the shortage, an accelerated training programme—the Calman programme—was set up five years ago. It was agreed that the number of new grade, specialist registrars should increase at a rate of 6 per cent. a year. That was designed to achieve a target of 2,000 consultant posts over 15 years. However, the number of consultant posts has not kept pace with the target, and trained obstetricians cannot now find jobs. Indeed, they are leaving the NHS altogether.

Last year, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Royal College of Midwives jointly published a document called "Towards Safer Childbirth". One of its recommendations was that a consultant should be present in the labour ward for 40 hours a week. Speaking as a lay woman in this matter, I cannot help observing that babies are no respecters of the 40-hour week and have a tendency to arrive at night. As I know to my cost, things can go wrong very suddenly during childbirth. It is important to have specialised help on hand if, for example, a woman suffers a haemorrhage.

As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) pointed out, the increasing age of women at childbirth is an important factor when considering the ratio of midwives and obstetricians to the number of women giving birth. For the first time, the average age of women at first birth is now over 30. There are more complications in childbirth as the age of the mother increases. The advancing age at first birth may also partially explain the rise in the caesarean section rate, although I agree with the main thrust of the argument advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield that there is a strong tendency towards technical births rather than natural ones. However, it is important to note that the advancing age of women at first birth is likely to give rise to an increase in the caesarean section rate.

In another place, Earl Howe drew attention to the unacceptable level of preventable accidents in labour. He said:

> In 1995, 453 babies died as a result of asphyxia or trauma suffered during labour or delivery.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 608, c. 738.]

That represents half the total number of infant deaths in childbirth. The shortage of midwives must be a contributory factor to the state of morale in the obstetric profession.

Another important point that was brought out in the debate was that this country has one of the highest percentages of low birth weight babies, higher than even Albania and Latvia. That is a disgrace, and I would like to hear from the Minister what steps the Government are taking to tackle it. Low birth weight is, of course, associated with other health difficulties in later life. I suspect that it is not unrelated to the problem of childbirth to very young mothers and their level of knowledge about care of themselves and their babies during pregnancy. I want to hear from the Minister on that point.

Given the facts, it is surely time for the Government to restore the rate of growth in consultant posts, so that we are back on target for the full complement by 2010, as originally envisaged, and so that the considerable amount of public money that has gone into training doctors in obstetrics is not wasted because there are no posts to which they can be appointed. Then, we will see that training translated into helping women and midwives to ensure that we can improve on the number of safe deliveries. That must be our main goal, in implementing good practice in maternity services.

12.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on securing the debate. It is an important issue and is close to my heart, because of recent personal experience. I am aware of his long-standing interest in the subject. The report by the Select Committee that he chaired in the early 1990s prompted real and lasting change in the provision of maternity care. I pay tribute to that report and to the "Changing Childbirth" report and the work done by Baroness Cumberlege on the issues in the mid-1990s.

Huge advances have been made in the past few years in changing the experience of women during pregnancy and childbirth. There has been real progress towards the provision of a safer, more personal, woman-centred maternity service that offers women greater choice, continuity of care and control. It is now safer to give birth than ever. The figures for maternal and perinatal mortality are at their lowest ever level, and it is the overriding expectation of pregnant women, their partners, their families and those who care for them that the pregnancy and delivery will be safe and healthy for mother and baby.

Childbirth is about more than safety. Maternity services exist to support women throughout their pregnancy, to help them to experience pregnancy and childbirth as a positive and life-enhancing experience and to give their babies the best possible start in family life. On the whole, satisfaction rates for NHS maternity services are high. The Audit Commission report on maternity services, published in March 1997, found that 90 per cent. of the women surveyed were very pleased or pleased with how they were treated during pregnancy and childbirth. That is a high satisfaction rate, and it is a credit to the dedication and skills of all the professionals who are involved in maternity care.

There is, however, no room for complacency. "Changing Childbirth" set out a vision of maternity services with which few could disagree. The report's central principles—appropriateness, effectiveness and accessibility in maternity care—are largely embedded in current mainstream practice. We are not, and cannot be, content to stand still. The Government must continue to examine maternity services to see what can be done to secure further improvements, particularly in the quality of care and in tackling inequalities of care.

I want to cover some of the issues raised during the debate. The hon. Member for Macclesfield referred to unacceptable variations in caesarean section rates. The Department is concerned about those variations throughout the country and we need to deal with the lack of clarity about appropriate standards and best practice. We are aware of concern about the widespread variation, so we have put in place a chain of work to deal with that. First, we have taken steps to strengthen local audit processes and to publish figures on caesarean section rates by individual trusts for the first time. Secondly, we have commissioned a national audit study on caesarean section rates from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to set standards where they are badly needed. That move has been widely welcomed by professional groups, consumers and women. We shall look carefully to see what lessons can be learnt from the thorough audit and to ensure that the results are used to develop best practice in future. Thirdly, we have funded the development of clinical guidance in problem areas such as induction of labour and electronic foetal monitoring. Fourthly, we have worked closely with consumer organisations to improve information on caesarean section, because the information that is provided to pregnant women varies dramatically throughout the country.

The reconfiguration of maternity services was also raised. A report will be published shortly by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and I am sorry that it was not published before our debate, because it could have been used to inform that debate. I apologise for the fact that it is not yet in the public domain and that I am commenting on it when other hon. Members have not been able to see it. The report was commissioned by the Department of Health to examine the changes in the way in which maternity care is provided. Women's expectation of services has changed. Hospital stays are shorter and care is provided, as much as possible, in accessible community settings and is delivered by midwives. That report does not recommend the closure of many small maternity units, as has been rumoured in the press. It provides reference criteria to be taken into consideration when changes in maternity services are planned and will be widely welcomed by those involved in maternity services. For example, it makes it clear that issues such as access, transport, availability and choice must be taken into account in local decision-making.

In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), there must be a future for midwife-led units and they will continue to be a matter for local decision making. We believe strongly in a future for midwife-led care as part of reconfiguration.

As part of our response to the report, we shall examine obstetric risk assessment. Safety is always paramount for women and health professionals, but it must not be used as an excuse to return to the traditional medical model of childbirth. Pregnancy is not an illness and maternity services exist to provide care for a predominantly healthy population during a normal life

[Yvette Cooper]

event. The vast majority of pregnancies and births are uncomplicated and best cared for in a predominantly midwife-led service.

For the minority of pregnancies and births that prove complicated, there must be access to expert medical advice. One issue covered in the report is the need for national standards for obstetric risk assessment, so that low-risk pregnancies can be consistently distinguished from high-risk pregnancies and managed accordingly in appropriate settings.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am encouraged by much of what the Minister has said. Before she finishes, will she comment on the exceptional success of the Edgware centre and on the Albany midwifery practice, which again sets a standard that could be repeated all over the country and provides the real choice and the midwifery-led service that so many of us believe in?

Yvette Cooper: I was indeed planning to comment on some of the best practice issues that hon. Members have identified. I was lucky enough to benefit from team midwifery care in Pontefract, where a small team of midwives, whom women are able to get to know, provide support in the community before the birth, during labour and after the birth. I was very impressed with the service and the support that I was given and gained huge benefits from it.

A wide variety of models is in place across the country, but continuity of care is crucial. There is a huge gap in our knowledge about how successful and effective the different models are and what the benefits are for the women who experience them. The hon. Member for Macclesfield highlighted the successful results at the Edgware birth centre and mentioned other examples as well.

We need to obtain comprehensive information about the different models that are in place. That is why we have commissioned detailed research into this issue and will report over the next year on the nature of the models of midwife care around the country, the way in which they are organised, funded and arranged and the difference that they can make to the women concerned.

Mrs. Spelman: Could I encourage the Minister to consider, as part of that research, whether midwives are being replaced by less well qualified personnel for after-care visits? I am sure that, like me, she benefited from the midwife calling after the birth. I understand that there is a tendency for the midwife to be replaced after delivery by somebody who is less qualified.

Yvette Cooper: I shall look into that. It is not an issue that I am aware of. High-quality care in the weeks and months after the birth is important, partly to prevent post-natal depression, which can have repercussions on the beginning of family life and can affect children's chances for many years to come. The research is being done by the national perinatal epidemiology unit to inform our development and our ability to spread best practice across the country and ensure that it is evidence-based.

Hon. Members also asked about midwife staffing. Maintaining and developing excellent midwifery services is at the heart of our agenda. The national recruitment, retention and vacancy survey, which we published in September last year, showed that only 2 per cent. of midwifery posts—some 370—have been vacant for three months or more, although there are variations across the country. We shall work closely with the trusts that are under pressure to address the difficulties, but we are making progress.

The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) referred to midwifery training. I find her remarks slightly surprising. The 28 per cent. cut in the number of nursing and midwifery training places between 1992 and 1995 was felt throughout the NHS. I am pleased to report that the Government-funded expansion in training places during the past two years—some £50 million was involved by the end of last year—has meant that applications for midwifery training have risen by 50 per cent.

As a result of our national recruitment exercise, last year more than 550 midwives contacted NHS employers about returning to work. Since this year's campaign was launched on 28 February, more than 6,000 calls have been received from people who are interested in midwifery, including more than 120 calls from qualified midwives who are interested in returning to the NHS. We need to continue with that important effort and to resolve the concerns that hon. Members raised this morning about career progression.

"Making a Difference" sets out the Government's strategic vision for nursing, midwifery and health visiting. That strategy will ensure that midwives benefit from better support and that modern, flexible, family-friendly employment practices are promoted. Many midwives have family responsibilities, and introducing family-friendly employment practices into the NHS will make a difference to recruitment and retention.

Dr. Brand: Will the Minister explain what the minimum grade for a qualified midwife should be in the present system?

Yvette Cooper: Hon. Members asked important questions about the progression of midwives' careers. We are currently appointing the first midwifery consultants—the most experienced and expert practitioners are being appointed to those important midwifery positions. The establishment of those posts will extend the clinical career structure, which will encourage practitioners who might otherwise have gone into management to remain in practice and to do what they came into midwifery and nursing to do.

"Changing Childbirth" was mentioned earlier. In the few minutes that remain, I want to discuss the way in which we have extended that approach. "Changing Childbirth" changed the scene dramatically, but we cannot stand still. One of the most important ways in which we can extend its values is to tackle inequalities across the country. In the United Kingdom, the poorer one is, the less healthy one is likely to be. Life expectancy at birth for a baby boy is about five years less in social classes 4 and 5 than it is for baby boys with professional parents. We are determined to tackle such differences, which can have an effect at the start of a child's life or in the womb.

Our debate has progressed, and we now need to build on "Changing Childbirth" and to take steps to deal with inequalities in maternity care. Drug misuse in pregnancy

needs to be tackled. The number of women who misuse drugs has increased considerably during the past 30 years, and many of those women are in their childbearing years. Pregnancy can act as a catalyst for change, and it is vital for the mother and the baby that pregnant drug misusers have proper access to support from appropriate services. Earlier this month, the Department of Health published guidelines on clinical management, which include best practice for managing pregnant drug misusers.

Some innovative services have been established, including a project in Sheffield for pregnant mothers who are addicted to heroin. The project has established a co-ordinated approach that includes GPs and a central clinic that offers quick access to the usual primary care services and to specialist drug services.

Women who smoke and who are pregnant constitute another priority area. Each year, more than 400 babies are stillborn or die soon after birth because the mother smoked. Smoking during pregnancy is associated with health inequalities.

The hon. Member for Meriden asked about low birth weight. That is part of our concern about health inequalities because low birth weight is linked to low income and to deprivation. The sure start programmes will examine the matter across the country. Those programmes will provide £450 million over three years across England to give support to the children and families who are most in need. That must involve support for maternity services, including better support during the weeks and months immediately following the birth of the baby—as the hon. Member for Meriden said—and examination of issues surrounding post-natal nutrition and support for the mother and baby.

There is much excellent practice across the country; we need to build on that and to tackle variations in maternity care. Like hon. Members who have spoken, I believe that midwife care must lie at the centre of that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. Time is up.

Student Nurses

12.30 pm

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Last week there was an article in my regional daily newspaper about flying angels—nurses recruited from the Philippines to ease the national health service staffing crisis in the west country, which is not the only region to suffer from the problem. At the heart of the crisis is low pay for student nurses, which has led to a shortfall in recruitment and a 25 per cent. drop-out rate from many courses.

The issue was highlighted last month, when student nurses—I was pleased to see several from my constituency—lobbied Members of Parliament. Because of my concern about what I was told by constituents at the lobby, I was fortunate enough to secure this debate to draw the Government's attention to the situation. I look forward to hearing what the Minister plans to do about it.

There is currently a confusing three-tier system of funding for student nurses. That was the subject of early-day motion 569, which has so far attracted 70 signatures. As hon. Members will appreciate, they cannot all be the signatures of Liberal Democrat Members. The three-tier system has the following structure: first, those who are seconded on a salary from their trust; secondly, those who are on diploma courses, who receive a Department of Health bursary; and thirdly, those who are taking degrees, receive means-tested bursaries and are eligible for student loans. The Department apparently recognises the funding problem for the latter two groups, because it now encourages more trusts to second health care assistants to nurse education on a salary. So far, 1,000 students have taken up that offer. They retain supernumerary status on the wards.

One of the student nurses who came to see me had previously been a health care assistant on a low income, during which time she had been entitled to family credit. She is now a bursary nursing student, and has no entitlement to family credit and no help with child care costs. She is working harder than she did as a health care assistant, with much longer hours, and is financially worse off. How long does the Minister think that she and others like her can put up with the pressure for the sake of a long-term investment in her career and in the NHS?

Another student wrote to me to say:

> The nursing course which I am on requires me to squeeze 4,600 hours of learning into 3 years. During the period when all other students are on holiday we are studying or on clinical placements. My friends who are taking other university degrees or diplomas have nearly 3 months holiday in the summer, I get 3 weeks. During this time I will be revising for exams and working extra shifts as an HCA to make up a wage large enough to live on. On my days off I work as a care assistant. I have no choice but to do this in order to pay my bills and be able to live. The Government states that nobody should live in poverty. £4,500 a year sounds like poverty to me!

If nursing students had kept their right to a nationally negotiated salary when Project 2000 started, they would now be earning about £10,000 a year—double the current bursary. Student poverty is not the only reason that student nurses drop out of courses, but it is one of the reasons most commonly given. That poverty is caused not only by low income, but by high costs—

[Jackie Ballard]

especially in rural areas such as my constituency. For example, student nurses told me that the NHS Executive has recently changed its policy on reimbursing travel expenses to clinical placements. That has caused a great deal of confusion. One student said that she often spends £30 a week on petrol to get to her placements. That money comes out of her standard bursary.

Unison and many student nurses would like to see a return to salaried student status. They believe that it would reduce the drop-out rate and aid recruitment, and that it would increase loyalty to the NHS. The Minister is probably aware that the Royal College of Nursing takes a different view. It would prefer bursaries to be increased. It fears that students would lose their supernumerary status if they were salaried. It says that students used to be used as cheap labour and that they had little time to learn, which was why Project 2000 was implemented.

Whatever the disagreement between the unions and students on the best way forward, they all agree that the Prime Minister will not be able to deliver his promised 10,000 new nurses while the funding to support students is so low. Many nursing and midwifery students face financial hardship. They suffer more hardship than most other students because many are mature students with family responsibilities. One third of nursing and midwifery students are more than 25 years old, one third are married or have partners and a quarter of them have dependent children.

At the very least, those students need higher bursaries. They should be reimbursed for the cost of travelling to clinical placements. Will the Minister clarify the position on reimbursement? Students—especially those with child care responsibilities—need access to social security benefits. I hope that the Government agree that it is a serious problem. They will not achieve their aim of recruiting more nurses into the NHS if it is not solved. I hope that the Minister will give us some idea of the way forward.

12.36 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) on her success in the ballot. She chose to raise the matter of maintenance for student nurses, an essential group of people who help to deliver on the Government's plans to modernise the NHS and to improve patient care—objectives that the hon. Lady supports.

I shall put the matter in its proper context. In the financial year 2000-01, the NHS will support about 50,000 nursing and midwifery students—about 45,000 diploma-level students and about 5,000 degree-level students. The average bursary is about £5,000 a year for diploma-level students and £2,100 a year for those studying at degree level. Additional allowances are provided for some older students, for some single parents and for those with dependants. The hon. Lady drew attention to each of those three groups. An additional allowance of £590 a year is payable to older students—those aged 26 and over—and a single-parent addition of nearly £900 a year and a dependants' allowance of between about £1,700 and about £3,000 a year are payable, depending on the number and age of dependants. The hon. Lady was particularly concerned about student nurses who had dependants. The scheme allows additional support for them.

This year, we shall spend well over £200 million on bursaries and almost £700 million on all aspects of nursing and midwifery training, of which about £500 million will be spent on pre-registration training. By anyone's reckoning, that is a substantial package of support. We recognise, however, that we need to increase the number of staff to match the expansion in services to be provided by the new NHS. We have already achieved a great deal. The latest annual work force figures show that 5,500 more nurses are working in the NHS this year than just over a year ago.

The hon. Lady referred to a crisis in nursing. We need to put the matter in context. As part of our plans to expand services and improve patient care, we are expanding the number of nurse training places by 6,000 and reversing the cuts made by the previous Government. I am sure that the hon. Lady would welcome that. Last year, more than 15,000 student nurses began training—the highest number to do so for six years. If the previous Government had matched that commitment to nurse training during their last five years in office, more than 14,000 extra nurses could be working on the wards. Sadly, that is not the case.

Jackie Ballard: I do not dispute the numbers of people who have been attracted to nursing courses, but will the Minister comment on the drop-out rate? He may have been planning to deal with that point, about which I asked a parliamentary question some time ago. The drop-out figures for the year in which the 15,000 people began training are not yet available.

Mr. Hutton: I think that that is the case, and I shall comment further on the matter in a moment. It is, however, important to be aware of the whole story. We accept that there are legitimate concerns and I know that the hon. Lady referred to them, but I want to try to set the whole picture of student nurse training in the right context.

As a result of the additional investment that we are making in the NHS, we shall be able to provide up to 15,000 more nurses to care for patients on the wards. Of course, it takes three years to train a nurse, so it will take time to reverse the previous Government's complacency and underinvestment in the national health service. However, more students are already embarking on the training that will deliver on this Government's commitment to improved patient care. The hon. Lady may be interested to know that the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service has recently released figures that reveal a 24 per cent. increase in people starting nursing degree courses this year. Strong indications suggest that people are willing and prepared to embark on this important career. The 24 per cent. increase is the second highest increase for any degree choice starting in the 1999-2000 academic year. The end-year figures from the Nursing and Midwifery Admissions Service show that, last year, the number of applicants for nursing and midwifery diploma courses rose by 73 per cent. to more than 32,000 people. The number of students taking up diploma courses has also risen by 18 per cent.

Those are positive indications that we are at long last starting to turn a corner in recruiting these key workers into the national health service. They demonstrate our commitment to nurses as key to the delivery of our modernisation plans and to tackling nursing shortages. Our substantial investment in non-medical training, which amounts to some £1 billion in the current financial year, is helping us to turn the corner on recruiting nurses to the national health service.

The hon. Lady may like to know that her local education consortium in Somerset is planning to invest some £44 million in training in this financial year. That is a significant investment in the future of the national health service in her part of the country.

A new NHS careers service is also helping to feed more students into nurse training. The service was launched in April 1999 and initially covers nurses, health visitors and midwives. It uses modern technology to provide an inquirer-led service that is both accessible and objective. A call centre operation offers provision for simple inquiries for help and information and for more detailed inquiries dealt with by professional advisers. It handles about 1,000 calls a week.

Another key part of our recruitment and retention strategy is pay modernisation. For the second year running, the Government have accepted in full the recommendations of the Nurses and Midwives Pay Review Body, this time for 2000-01. That will mean an increase in basic pay of at least 3.4 per cent. for all nurses., and some groups of staff will receive substantially more. After years in which pay rises were staged, it is right that the awards should now be paid in full. Together with last year's award, we have provided nurses who are completing their training with a greater increase in pay in real terms than they have received at any time since 1987-88. Starting pay for newly qualified nurses in grade D will rise from £17,325 to £17,915 in inner London and from £14,400 to £14,890 in locations outside London, including the hon. Lady's constituency. Our decision to implement the award in full recognises that nurses deserve a fair pay award, especially after they coped so magnificently with the huge pressures of the winter. The pay award will also help the NHS to recruit and retain more staff, which will mean that it can treat patients more quickly.

Equally—this relates to the hon. Lady's comments—we recognise the need to provide student nurses with the support that they need throughout their training. That is why the NHS bursary scheme continues to provide more generous financial support than is available for people in mainstream higher education. In contrast to what happened under the previous Government, bursary rates are being increased again by the rate of inflation from September. That will be the third successive annual increase. We are committed to maintaining the level of the bursary. It is worth pointing out to the hon. Lady that, prior to 1998, there had been no increase in the bursary rate for three years. The Government have acted decisively to improve the bursary arrangements.

We recognise the hard work and commitment required of student nurses, who undertake an exceptionally demanding education and training programme. The hon. Lady mentioned some of the pressures on student nurses.

Jackie Ballard: I thank the Minister for giving way again. He said that the bursaries were more generous than the funding available to other students. I am sure that he would accept that the hours of work and study required of student nurses are quite different from those of other students.

Does the Minister know the gap between the bursary level, even with dependants' allowances, for someone with one or two children, and what the same person would receive in income support, which the Government would consider the basic level that anyone would need?

Mr. Hutton: If the hon. Lady wants detailed figures and calculations, I shall have to write to her.

While the bursary scheme continues to provide effective support for students, we know that more needs to be done, particularly to tackle the difficulties experienced by some groups during the training period. We want to ensure the widest possible access to nurse training programmes, so that the future NHS work force will be diverse and fully representative of the communities that they serve. We want a system that provides adequate support in all circumstances, so that no one suffers undue financial hardship as a result of choosing to train as a nurse. That is why, as I am sure that the hon. Lady knows, the Government are currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the NHS support package for trainee nurses, to ensure that the best support continues to be provided.

The review of student support will be wide ranging and will include examination of the different levels of support provided for diploma and degree students; the need to ensure the widest possible access to nurse training; the issue of hardship; and the interface between our support arrangements and the benefits system. We shall also consider student accommodation and travel expenses.

The enhanced level of support available to diploma students was introduced to stem the year-on-year decline in the number of young people entering nursing training. To date, to safeguard recruitment, those differences have been maintained. Student nurses, of course, face particular pressures that other groups of students do not, such as their short vacations and their extensive involvement in clinical placements. Older students, and those with dependants, can also face particular difficulties in gaining access to nurse training. For that reason, student nurses are already provided with enhanced support in comparison with other higher education students. In addition, the NHS meets student liability for tuition fee contributions in full. That is normally worth £1,025 a year. We want to continue to provide the necessary support to guarantee the future supply of those key workers.

Hon. Members, and certainly the hon. Lady, will be aware of adverse publicity in the professional press, and from some professional bodies, following clarification of the rules on travel allowances for students attending clinical placements. There have been no changes in the rules since 1 September. Any students who incur additional travel costs—when compared with their normal daily travel costs—can continue to claim them in full.

My ministerial colleagues and I are also aware of the problems affecting predominantly rural areas, such as the south-west, where the hon. Lady's constituency is

[Mr. Hutton]

situated, and some of the smaller health care professions, in which opportunities for theoretical and practical training can be widely spread geographically. In developing our policy relating to travel expenses, our aim is to be fair to all students while safeguarding recruitment and ensuring that we do not impose an unacceptable administrative burden on students, universities or the NHS student grants unit.

I recognise in particular the importance, and the value to the NHS, of attracting mature students, single parents and those with dependants into nurse training. I am also aware of the particular difficulties faced by some of those students, many of whom have increased financial commitments, in accessing nurse education programmes. We want to find ways of ensuring the widest possible access to training in future, regardless of the individual circumstances of the student. This year's review of student support will therefore include examination of the interface between student support arrangements and the benefits system. The hon. Lady mentioned that matter.

The Department's officials are working closely with the student grants unit, education consortiums and the higher education institutions to ensure that we have in place an effective method of paying support to student nurses. Since taking on additional responsibilities in September 1999, the student grants unit has authorised payments to approximately 17,500 nursing students and those studying in the professions allied to medicine totalling about £38 million. That is a significant achievement for the unit's 25 staff. The centralisation of responsibility for the assessment and payment of bursaries at the student grants unit has been of real benefit to students, both in terms of providing a single point of contact for advice and as a way of ensuring equal treatment for all NHS-funded students.

We also want to ensure that nurses are provided with high-quality and affordable accommodation when and where they need it. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister recently published his Green Paper on housing and announced the starter home initiative. Nurses will be helped to buy their own homes in areas where housing is costly.

The initiative will make a real difference, but we want to go further still. At the recent Royal College of Nursing conference, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced his appointment of John Yates as a new national nurse housing co-ordinator. His remit is to secure more affordable homes for more nurses. The accommodation will be in new high-quality developments—flats, apartments and houses—which will help to attract still more nurses to the profession. Surplus NHS assets will be used to kick-start investment in new homes for nurses. The new co-ordinator will spearhead a range of new partnerships with housing investors, councils and the Housing Corporation, to build affordable new accommodation for nurses in high-cost areas. That might go some way to meet the hon. Lady's concerns.

We want to ensure that as many student nurses as possible complete their training and go on to work in the NHS. Attrition rates from nursing courses vary from year to year, from university to university and between the branches of nursing. Figures from the English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting show a continuing downward trend in overall attrition for diploma level students. That development is welcome. Those students make up the majority of the nursing student population. The figures compare favourably with those for other forms of higher education. It is our intention to ensure that we have in place a system that provides all students with appropriate financial support throughout their training, thus, we hope, minimising the loss of students from training courses.

We also intend to strengthen nurse education; the strategy was set out in the document "Making a Difference—Strengthening the nursing, midwifery and health visiting contribution to health and healthcare." We intend to continue to support other initiatives, such as the encouragement of former staff back into the profession. Implementation of the strategy will help to ensure the delivery of high-quality midwifery education, which will help to meet the needs of patients and clients in the 21st century. We are ensuring that nurses and midwives are properly prepared to contribute fully to a modern NHS and we are modernising career frameworks to provide more satisfying and rewarding careers.

Once qualified, today's nurses enjoy better pay and can look forward to more flexible shift patterns, improved career development and a service that rewards them fairly for taking on the additional responsibilities that we want them to undertake. Our initiatives to recruit more nurses, to encourage more former staff back into the profession, to support nurses properly throughout their training and to ensure that qualified staff are properly rewarded are clear signs of the Government's commitment to nurses, to services and, most important, to patients. Tomorrow's qualified nurses will form the backbone of the NHS and will help to deliver on the opportunity that we now have to modernise the health service and to provide the care that nurses know that their patients deserve.

Peru

12.54 pm

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Having returned from Peru only last Thursday with the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), I am pleased to welcome this short debate. Sponsored by the British branch of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we were invited to observe and assess the conditions of elections for the presidency and members of Congress, which took place on Sunday 9 April. We tried to observe in a spirit of neutrality and, where possible, help to make the elections in Peru fair and democratic. They held great significance for the future of democracy in that country.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry applied himself tirelessly to our responsibilities. He would agree that we were helped immeasurably by our excellent ambassador, Mr. Roger Hart, his staff at the embassy in Lima and the honorary consul in Truijillo. The visit was enjoyable and interesting, but we owe the House the same candid account that we gave to the IPU yesterday.

During the visit, it was necessary to convey to the United Kingdom our grave concerns about events as they unfolded. The ambassador made those known to my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), whose letter, which was placed in the public domain in Peru, was timely and helpful. My hon. Friend shared our pressing concern to see how the election of the successful candidate for President was procured and to ensure that the process was not only free and fair, but seen to be free and fair by the people of Peru and the international community. Our priority was the electoral process rather than the candidates. We had no preference in mind.

There were times when our concerns deepened. I do not disguise the anxieties that we felt and expressed about the credibility of the campaign, the counting of the votes and the declaration of the results. Sadly, our perceptions were shared by thousands of Peruvians whose peaceful demonstrations were met with tear gas as they approached the presidential palace. They almost created an atmosphere of ineffable violence. Thankfully, that was prevented because, after days of waiting for the final result, the votes were counted and no winner was declared. There was a widespread belief that a second ballot would take place between the two front-runners, Fujimori and Toledo, but I was profoundly disturbed to discover this morning that no such announcement has been made 10 days after the polls closed.

I make the plea today that when the second election takes place, as we hope it will, it is free, fair, transparent and without harassment from any quarter. However, given our experience and that of our European colleagues, that will be no mean task. Some things must be changed next time round. The European representatives from Belgium, Great Britain and the Netherlands issued a joint statement at a press conference. It said:

> The state resources have been abusively and largely used to serve one candidate. The examples are countless. The Belgian delegation has specifically seen peasants being taken to a meeting of the...candidate in trucks belonging to the State. The State television is almost a monopoly of this candidate—

Mr. Fujimori—

> This situation is not acceptable since it breaks the equity among the candidates and turns the process into a non-democratic one.

The inequality between opposition groups and the existing state machine is best manifested in the significant irregularities of the constitutional tribunal in Peru, not least the fact that the President changed the constitution that he introduced to give himself an unprecedented third term, and promptly sacked three of the five judges who ruled in an appeal court that his actions were illegal. Indeed, the whole state institutional system seems to have been organised to re-elect the President. It is common knowledge that the President relies heavily on the Peruvian armed forces and some local authorities are run by the army.

Transparencia published a document that, on page after page, gives examples of abuses and irregularities. First, Toledo's name was cut from a huge number of ballot papers with scissors, so that if people wanted to vote for him, his name simply was not there. Secondly, in a region with 169,000 electors, 175,000 ballot papers were returned.

There were repeated reports of public resources that were intended for Government social programmes being used to gain support for the President's election campaign. That cannot be right. Transparencia, a body trusted by the international community, denounced what it described as "unprecedented irregularities and harassment", including attacks against its computing systems, electricity cuts and interception of telephone lines. To his credit, the ombudsman made his reservations equally clear.

We were not alone in noting—how could we have failed to do so?—the appalling imbalance on television, radio and the media, which would have been farcical had it not been so serious. Indeed, in a carefully considered paper, issued just before the election, Mr. Terence Duffy, consultant to Electoral Reform International Services, said:

> Currently, Peru does possess a vigorous and extensive (if socially limited) culture of political debate expressed in some of the cable television channels such as Canal N, in the weekly magazine Caretas, and in newspapers such as El Comercio and La Republica. Regrettably, these media possess rather limited audiences, totalling no more than a few hundred thousand people, which is a gross imbalance in relation to the scale of the total Peruvian population. The Peruvian media are therefore heavily Lima-centric and possess an audience which is solely located in the highest socio-economic sectors. Regrettably, economic considerations would prevent the extensive dissemination of these media to the wider Peruvian public.

In conclusion, I thank the Minister warmly for his vigilance on these matters and ask the Government to take the initiative in ensuring European Union monitoring next time around. Even then, delivering a timely democratic election will not be easy. However, such representation and the expressed will of the international community can go a long way to achieving fair play. Never again should the election observation mission feel the need to use the expression "a culture of fear." Instead, let us hope that we can see a country with limitless potential achieve that potential in a democratic way, as I believe Peru will do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Before I call the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross),

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

will the right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) confirm that the hon. Gentleman has his consent and that of the Minister to intervene?

Mr. Clarke: Yes.

1.3 pm

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, brief though it is. However, I would have preferred to have the opportunity for a much longer debate so that we could have explored the matter in depth. It was a pleasure to share the visit with the right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke). We did not know each other very well before we went, but we returned as firm friends. Although we did not know much about Peru before we went, we knew a fair bit about elections and we now know about Peru as a result of our visit.

We were made aware before we left of the serious problems that Peru has faced in recent years. At one stage, it had over 7,000 per cent. inflation per annum, and the country suffered from terrorism and cocaine. The last was more of a problem that Peru was exporting to the rest of the world than an internal problem, because I understand that, at one stage, it produced over 50 per cent. of the world's cocaine.

The right hon. Gentleman and I returned with a kaleidoscope of impressions, for we found a land of great contrasts—the very wealthy, the very poor, heart-breaking street children, shanty towns, unemployment and modern bustling towns and cities. The people were friendly, helpful and, in many cases, very outspoken: their opinions were made plain to us from every level of society.

The right hon. Gentleman and I visited one shanty town, with a policeman or two in tow, and went into one of the huts there: they can be described in no other way. The lady of the house said that she had voted for Fujimori. Her son stated openly that he had voted for Toledo. Therefore, the people had a measure of free speech that they were not afraid to exercise, even in the presence of the police. Some of the meetings in which we took part were valuable in clarifying the conditions in the country. Given the way in which the population exercised free speech, we are both hopeful that Peru will overcome not only its economic and social problems, but its political difficulties. I want to deal now with the political problems to which my right hon. Friend referred.

It was evident to us that President Fujimori enjoys a great deal of electoral support; it would be wrong to give any other impression. People recall how desperate the nation's plight was when he first took office. He defeated, or at least suppressed, terrorism, by means that we in this country could never find acceptable, but which he and his Government considered necessary; he stopped inflation, which is now between 3 and 4 per cent. per annum; he did quite a lot on the drugs front, and is commended by the United States Government for that; he reached agreement with Chile and Ecuador on long-festering border disputes; and he has built many schools and roads, which benefit the poorest sections of society. It is a formidable list of successes, which even his most vociferous critics commended. We found only one person who was prepared to condemn him at every turn. The downside is that when he took office, he could serve only one term of five years.

President Fujimori changed the constitution to allow two terms, and is now claiming the next term as his second, if he wins, as it is under the new constitution and his first term does not count, as it was under the old one. That was at the root of much of the opposition to him, for he is perceived by many as breaking his word and violating the constitution.

It was made plain to us that he had used doubtful methods to achieve his goal of running again and then attempting to secure election. The allegations seemed to us to be valid. Some are the ones that the right hon. Gentleman referred to; others are slightly different. The first is that the campaign against the other principal candidates was an utterly ruthless and vicious programme of vilification, which succeeded in destroying them one after the other. Mr. Toledo was a late-emerging candidate.

We were told that $3,000 made certain that any one of the tabloid newspapers published the stories, which were personally written with the headlines, the story and the editorial and then read on the street corners. The cost of television propaganda for opposition candidates was set so high that they could not afford it, and the stations that were willing to be even-handed ran into difficulties over advertising revenue from Government and other sources and increasing demands for unpaid tax.

Opposition rallies in other towns were disrupted by power cuts, land-line breakdowns, power failures to mobile phones and the closure of access roads on one pretext or another, so that folk could not get to the rallies. In addition, the poor who supported Fujimori got food aid, and 800,000 people have been promised a plot of land on which to build a house. All those are powerful inducements.

It was also made clear to us that many judges had been sacked and replaced by provisional judges; there were other official bodies where the membership simply screamed "rigging". There were questions about the accuracy of the electoral register. We were unhappy about all that and believed that it was not possible for the president to win on the first ballot, and that a second round would eventually become necessary. There is no guarantee that Fujimori would lose in the second round. He might win, even in an honest ballot, and every hon. Member knows that elections are difficult to predict.

Time does not permit me to continue, except to say that Peru is a wonderful country, full of men and women with high hopes. We wish them well and hope that the bright future that beckons will be achieved. They seem to have created a formidable array of institutions, procedures and documentation to ensure that fraud could not occur, but they left gaping holes in the process into which votes disappear and do not emerge in the same form.

Finally, I thank our ambassador and staff who were admirable in every way and looked after us very well indeed. I thank also the ambassadors of Belgium and the Netherlands, and their parliamentary representatives, whose company we enjoyed and whose report on their experiences we are happy to accept.

1.10 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): It is customary to congratulate the hon. Member who secures an Adjournment debate. In this case, more than congratulations are in order.I do not know how an Adjournment debate is secured in Peru—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the Minister is not implying that the systems in the House echo those in Peru in any way.

Mr. Battle: I suggest that the efficiency with which we can communicate speaks volumes.

The debate is timely, as it keeps the spotlight on the situation in Peru and keeps up the pressure. That is precisely what Adjournment debates should do and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) and the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) on bringing the matter to our attention while it is alive.

I congratulate them both on their valuable contribution to the IPU election monitoring mission to Peru. The telegrams that we received from our ambassador reflected the fact that they were a credit to Britain. Their work and the way in which they participated enhanced our parliamentary reputation, which is the purpose of the IPU. It was impressive to receive the feedback from the embassy as the situation unfolded. Monitoring should allow a snapshot to be taken to assess how the process is doing. The reports were on my desk during the process and they were important to enable us to react and to make a contribution to the process.

I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman for their kind words about our ambassador and his staff. The system was working at its best and the job was well done.

Outside the Chamber in Westminster Hall there is an exhibition on parliamentary work and elections. It reminds all of us why we are here and that, despite our 2,500 years of history, parliamentary democracy is not as advanced as it should be. Of the 30 elections taking place in the world this year, 16 are taking place in countries that have never had any form of democratic election. The process is relatively new and it is important that in places such as Peru, which has had democratic elections since 1980, we strengthen the process and ensure that it is not undermined. The work of my right hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman as observers was crucial.

Throughout the Peruvian election process, the United Kingdom played a leading role in calling for free, fair and transparent elections. We financed two visits to Peru by representatives of Electoral International Reform Services. Reports of those visits highlighted worrying deficiencies in the electoral process at that time. In particular, the reports drew attention to the misuse of state resources, including food aid for party political purposes and manipulation of the media, to which reference has been made. We gave copies of those reports to the Peruvian Government and to members of the IPU delegation in Peru, and circulated them widely at international level. The spotlight was turned on events, so that matters could be improved.

We supported the activities of the office of the Peruvian ombudsman, Mr. Santistevan, in the election campaign. Our Government contributed some £20,000 to his election-monitoring mission. Since March 1998, we have contributed more than £140,000 to the cost of important work and research conducted by his office. He visited me just before the election, and we discussed that process. He expressed certain fears and spoke of the need to keep the spotlight on the election process to ensure a fair outcome. We will continue to support his activities in the run up to the second round of voting.

Last week, I met members of the inter-agency group on Peru, with whom we have strong and established ties. The group consists of a number of non-governmental organisations, including the Peru support group and Oxfam. The meeting followed an earlier exchange between members of that group and officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Latin American and Caribbean department. In other words, consultation with people who were familiar with events on the ground has been vital throughout this process.

Last week's discussion, in which I outlined our concerns about irregularities highlighted by independent observers, proved useful. As a result of that meeting and information received from those observers, I released a statement that expressed those concerns and underlined our view that a second round of voting was desirable and sensible. A copy of that statement was given to the Peruvian authorities by the British ambassador in Lima.

On the morning of 12 April, Jose Portillo, the head of the official electoral authority of the national office of electoral processes, announced that, with 97.68 per cent. of votes counted, Fujimori had 49.84 per cent. and Toledo had 40.31 per cent. He added that, with so few votes remaining, the "50 per cent. plus one" target for an outright first round victory could not be attained by any one candidate, so there would have to be a second round play-off. He explained that his office would not be able to deliver a final report on 100 per cent. of the results until official vote registration documents from polling stations abroad were received. Although a similar system operates in this country, receipt of those reports has been subject to considerable delay.

The head of the official electoral authority suggested that the national election board would have to resolve pending challenges to certain results registered in official vote registration documents. Again, such challenges occur in our elections. If there are squabbles over spoilt ballot papers and so on, agents sort them out there and then. The problem should not take long to resolve but, following the interim result of 12 April, there has been no official announcement of the final result, so a date has yet to be set for the second round. I share the concerns of my right hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman about that. Although I am confident that a second round will take place, I have instructed our ambassador to raise our concerns with the Peruvian authorities and the national office for electoral processes. In other words, the ambassador will advise them to get on with it.

We played a leading role in preparing European Union statements that expressed concern about the election campaign and developments on polling day. Prior to the elections, we helped to draw up the statement by the European Commission of Human Rights in Geneva on 24 March. It stated:

[Mr. Battle]

The EU continues to be disturbed by the decline in Peru of the rule of law and democratic institutions, including deterioration in the electoral process.

That reflects precisely the impressions that the hon. Member for East Londonderry outlined during the debate.

We also took the lead in issuing an EU statement condemning the withdrawal of Peru from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights last year. We made it clear that we did not think that that withdrawal was a good move. On 15 February, EU ambassadors, including the British ambassador in Lima, issued a public statement calling on the Peruvian authorities to take the measures necessary to implement important recommendations set out in the independent reports on the electoral process. We also initiated an EU statement on 7 April, expressing our deep concern over aspects of the election campaign and calling for procedures on polling day to be free and fair and to conform to international standards.

In the preliminary work leading up to the day of the election, we endeavoured, through the EU, to keep the international spotlight focused on the process to ensure that it was carried out correctly. It has worked imperfectly at best, but we must move on. We shall continue to work with our EU colleagues to impress on the Peruvian authorities the need to meet international standards as the second round of voting approaches. They now have an opportunity to get it right.

The Peruvian elections were discussed at the EU Latin America working party meeting on 17 April. I was asked earlier whether we could take the initiative, and I am happy to confirm to my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston that it was agreed at that meeting that the EU will be sending an observer mission. As part of that, the United Kingdom again plans to send observers, and I hope that my right hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman will once more be able to contribute in some way. It is important that we should keep up the good work.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry suggested that it would be better to have a wider debate on the economic, social and political context of development in Peru. I, too, would welcome that. In the short time available to us today, we have had to focus on the election process. That will be an on-going state of affairs until the second round, and we must keep a critical eye on it.

In relation to drugs, the Government are committed to tackling the global drug trafficking problem. Last week, we met President Pastrana of Colombia for an in-depth discussion about working more closely together to tackle international drug trafficking. That is a shared responsibility between producer and consumer countries. We have work to do on the streets and in the clinics here, as well as trying to eliminate production by finding alternative crops to coca and heroin.

We welcome Peru's commitment to its national drugs plan, and we are actively involved in bilateral and multilateral counter-drugs projects. In January 2000, I announced a further £500,000 contribution to a UN programme to monitor coca leaf production in Peru. Its aim is to discover the extent of production and to encourage a shift to alternative crops, providing peasant farmers with a livelihood while removing the potential for the cocaine trade.

We also keep a close eye on human rights in Peru. We continue to monitor closely the human rights situation and to raise human rights issues with the Peruvian Government whenever suitable opportunities arise. We press them whenever we consider that they are not adhering to their international obligations. For example, when they withdrew from the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, we joined our European Union partners in pressing them to re-join. In March this year, at the 56th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, we joined our EU partners in issuing a statement expressing concern at the decline in the rule of law and democratic institutions in Peru, including the deterioration in the electoral process.

In conclusion, democratic politics is a project. We try to deepen participation in democracy. As the posters outside in Westminster Hall demonstrate, there is a history to the development of democracy. Not long ago, only men could vote in Britain, and the franchise was extended to women only relatively recently. We must look for new ways of deepening our democracy, and increase the extent to which popular participation is built up from the base in all societies. We have a history of democracy dating back hundreds of years. I am proud of the fact that my colleagues have been to Peru to participate as monitors in its election process. Their work has been exemplary, and it stands as part of the tradition of campaigning to deepen democracy.

We share a common concern that, in Peru, democracy is very new and needs underpinning, supporting and encouraging; it does not need undermining. If we feel that it has been undermined, we have a duty to point that out. We look forward to the second round of voting, and we shall continue to monitor developments very closely during the electoral campaign. We shall encourage the Peruvian authorities to ensure that the conditions are in place for free, fair and transparent elections that are dominated not by fear but by the free decisions of the people participating in them. It is important for Peru to move forward democratically, not backwards. We shall continue to play a full diplomatic role in ensuring that that happens, and we are grateful to our colleagues for their work during the past few weeks.

1.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Computer Industry

1.30 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The events that I am about to describe go from the bizarre to the outrageous. Anyone who did not know that what I am about to say is entirely factual could be forgiven for thinking that they were listening to the plot of a John Grisham novel. It is a story about how a small west country business has been ripped off by one of the world's largest computer companies, while others pitch in at the same time.

Before I go into detail, I should say that the story includes the all-too-familiar tale of anti-competitive behaviour, of which the Microsoft case is the best-known current example. On this occasion, however, the behaviour is aimed against a United Kingdom company. As if that were not enough, the story also includes an almost incredible example of procrastination by the United States judiciary, which damages existing and future UK innovation at the expense of the British taxpayer. As a result, a west country company, which should now be a multi-million-pound operation pouring money into further innovations and creating wealth for the entire UK, is struggling for its existence.

AllVoice Computing plc develops computerised speech recognition products. Computer speech recognition allows a person to dictate into a microphone connected to a computer, with the result that the recognised words appear on the computer screen. No less a figure than Bill Gates has said that

> speech recognition is not just the future of Windows: it is the future of computers.

AllVoice did not invent speech recognition any more than Trevor Baylis, who is famous for inventing the clockwork radio, invented the radio or clockwork. However, it made the application of voice recognition a practical reality.

IBM and Dragon Systems Inc. dominate the relevant market. Dragon is a US company founded and owned by two long-serving IBM employees. When it first produced speech recognition—a facility for converting speech to text—there was no option to play back the audio on a word processor or through any other standard computer application. In effect, the dictator had no choice but to try to remember what was said in order to make corrections. Consequently, users had to interrupt their dictation and train of thought. Dragon's system required more time and effort than using a traditional dictating machine. In effect, it had invented a car that could never move out of first gear.

AllVoice's crucial innovation was to invent an error correction capability. That was done by linking the original spoken words to the text in the user's word processor, which meant that the user could freely dictate without pausing to correct the errors that inevitably occur. Furthermore, the provision of an option for storing the text with its linked audio meant that users could delegate the entire correction process if they preferred to do so. AllVoice also offered users an ability to record an audio note to accompany a delegated or deferred correction document. In 1996, the company received a prestigious Confederation of British Industry award for those inventions. Following the release of its inventions, AllVoice's sales rose dramatically and further sales and development staff were employed.

In January 1996, IBM informed AllVoice that it was seriously considering incorporating AllVoice technology into its products under a worldwide agreement. IBM urgently requested AllVoice to submit the software, including unreleased features, to IBM's speech research and development groups in Vienna and Florida. In February 1996, AllVoice were invited to Florida, at IBM's expense, to discuss the arrangements. Of course, promises of confidentiality were made, and IBM insisted that it had no intention of writing similar software. There was an understanding that should the evaluation of the products be satisfactory, some form of partnership would be entered into. Instead, in April 1996, after a satisfactory evaluation, IBM wrote to say that it was now working on the same functions. Over the next few weeks, IBM also tried unsuccessfully to trick AllVoice into signing away its intellectual property rights.

In June 1996, having clearly decided to exploit AllVoice's products for itself, IBM announced to the world that it would be delivering a new product with similar features in the following November. Pre-announcing a product is a well-known tactic of predators, which is designed to undermine competitors who would otherwise sell competing products in the time between the announcement and the release of the predator's product.

IBM slipped up temporarily in January 1997 by introducing a low-price product that had all AllVoice's features missing, no doubt thinking by then that AllVoice would be dead in the water. AllVoice responded by adding its features back in and then undercutting IBM's more expensive version by nearly 30 per cent. Once again, AllVoice's sales climbed dramatically, so in retaliation IBM resorted to anti-competitive actions against AllVoice. As the anti-competitive actions increased, AllVoice eventually filed a formal complaint with the European Court in December 1997—case No. IV/36 824. AllVoice is waiting on the European Court to take action.

In 1996 AllVoice decided to try to produce a complete British speech system by involving unique developments in natural speech from the university of Cambridge. AllVoice had by then discovered that it could apply for patents in the United States for some of its crucial features that had been pirated. UK patents were also applied for on previously undisclosed innovations and were obtained in May 1997.

Dragon Systems also invited AllVoice to the United States to discuss collaboration and was made aware of the imminent announcement of UK patents and applications for US and worldwide patents. Dragon wanted AllVoice to disclose all its details, without a confidentiality agreement, which of course AllVoice declined. However, Dragon by then had access to the UK patent public disclosures less than one month later, and its next version included the audio playback features previously missing from all its earlier products. Needless to say, that was in clear breach of patent, but having a right of action is one thing and successfully prosecuting it through the American judicial system is something else entirely.

[Mr. Patrick Nicholls]

AllVoice was awarded its first US patent on 25 August 1998. By then, its products were being pirated on a grand scale. I understand that it is a feature of American business practices that if a little guy has a patent that he is in all probability not in a position to enforce, all the big guys get in on the act. Therefore, all attempts by AllVoice, short of litigation, to stop the breach of its patent had no effect at all. Reluctantly, AllVoice had to resort to litigation in the United States. As an official complaint is currently outstanding against IBM, a patent infringement suit was filed in Boston on 12 February 1999 in the US District Court of Massachusetts against Dragon Systems. The court case number is CA No.99-CV-10436, and the judge allocated is the honourable Douglas P. Woodlock.

At this stage, as might be expected, AllVoice filed a motion for preliminary injunction against Dragon Systems. The purpose of a preliminary injunction is to prevent further harm from being done to the patent holder until the case can be dealt with. In any judicial system where injunctive relief is available, it is the very essence of the matter that the hearing be held swiftly. AllVoice's injunction hearing was held on 26 May 1999 and, incredibly, that is where matters rest. The judge has reserved to himself whether he will grant immediate relief—immediate relief after nearly a year. I am told that even AllVoice's American lawyers, practised as they are in the vagaries of their own litigation procedures, are stunned by the delay. All attempts to get the judge to move on it have failed. It is, frankly, bizarre.

Normally such motions are decided within a month. After a month had passed without a decision, AllVoice's US attorney, Sullivan and Worcester, started to make telephone calls to the court, to inquire about the status of the opinion. After six months of such contacts and still without a decision, Sullivan and Worcester wrote formally to the court in November 1999, pointing out that the inaction was an implicit endorsement of Dragon's patent infringement and urging the court's attention to the case. When that correspondence received no response, a motion was filed the following month for a status conference. The judge denied the motion on the same day, saying that it was "unnecessary".

That is where matters rest, except that AllVoice has had to scale down its operations in an attempt to stay in business, while Dragon includes AllVoice's patented features at no extra cost. The attorneys are analysing whether other companies include the same features. That cuts out any realistic possibility of AllVoice making sales; yet it has to fund the entire litigation because, subject to what I shall say in a moment, no Government help appears to be available to it.

Lest anyone thinks that this extraordinary inactivity by the American judicial system affects only a private company and not the taxpayer, let me disabuse them at once. In 1996, AllVoice received a Department of Trade and Industry SPUR award to assist with the development of natural speech recognition systems. That project cost nearly £200,000, of which the DTI funded 30 per cent. Indeed, part of the funding has been invested in taking forward intellectual property protection through US and UK patenting.

It is difficult to describe in a few words the magnitude of what has been done to AllVoice or, indeed, the advantages that the United Kingdom would have gained had AllVoice been able to proceed. I have reminded the Chamber what Bill Gates said about speech recognition. Every computer has a keyboard, which is a cumbersome barrier for most users. Speech control and dictation is increasingly being used as a better alternative. As more innovations are made, the keyboard will, almost certainly, disappear. AllVoice's invention can, therefore, be applied to virtually every computer. The value of the speech recognition market has been estimated at £2.1 billion for this year alone. Speech recognition packages, mostly with AllVoice features, have been among the top-selling software packages in the world since January 1998. Obviously, IBM is one of the bestsellers, but even Dragon's product is said to be the 10th best-selling software application of all time.

To date, AllVoice has spent more than £275,000 on outside intellectual property costs, including patent filing fees, patent attorneys, legal counsel in the United Kingdom and the United States and, probably, other US associates. That is more than the current reduced turnover of the entire company. Patent fees continue to mount up, as do the company's legal costs. On top of that, AllVoice's has had to devote daily resources to litigation for lengthy periods, at great additional cost.

The sickening thing is that we have seen it all before. James Dyson, inventor of the bagless vacuum cleaner, has been involved in patent litigation with numerous American corporations. He has spoken of being "shafted" by the Americans, in their efforts to put him out of business. They nearly succeeded. He was saved from a considerable debt for legal fees by a fortuitous Japanese licensing arrangement. Dyson is a major UK success story, but only after going through American litigation, with the help of Japanese funds.

Even closer to home, as it were, is the case of Rodime, a Scottish-based company that made a quantum leap forward by inventing a smaller computer disc drive, which was wiped out in US patent litigation. Six hundred and twenty jobs were lost in the fight against the two main protagonists, IBM and Seagate Technology. Seagate's name will be familiar to those involved in these matters, and well it might–Seagate is Dragon's main outside investor. After years of litigation, including revelations of attempts to interfere with the US Patent Office and anti-competitive behaviour, Rodime had to settle for just $45 million gross from Seagate, a mere fraction of what it would have got if it had received a proper percentage of all the disc drives that use its invention.

The way in which American industry has rallied round to carve up AllVoice makes a pack of sharks look like a convention of nuns. It is an utter disgrace. For reasons that are impossible to fathom, the American judicial system, instead of protecting the innocent, has played into the hands of the guilty.

The Minister, as a fair-minded person, will, I am sure, be as concerned as I am. Knowing how such things go, I can predict that her civil servants are already preparing to advise her that she has no standing in the American judicial process. I hope that, if she receives that advice, she will reject it. If the big battalions, in the form of Her Majesty's Government, will not intervene on AllVoice's

behalf, who will? The Government should make an approach to the US Government at the highest level–and I mean the highest level–and say that the injunctive procedures should be brought to a conclusion at once. Indeed, given the large sums of taxpayers' money that the Government have already put into AllVoice, I would like them to go further, by helping to fund the litigation that will still have to take place.

After all, Her Majesty's Government are not entirely powerless. The taxpayer helps to fund many of the manufacturing plants opened by US corporations as UK subsidiaries in areas of regional assistance. I assume that it is no coincidence that IBM has a manufacturing plant and call centre at Greenock in Scotland. Before continuing with those subsidies, or agreeing to new ones, we should insist that those corporations declare all existing official disputes publicly, as well as declaring all new ones, as they occur. The Government could make it a condition of assistance that litigation be conducted responsibly, rather than in a predatory fashion. I say that because I believe in solutions, as well as problems. The Government are better placed than I am to work out what steps they could take. What they should not do is wash their hands of the issue and say that it is all down to the American courts.

The Government should look specifically at the activities of IBM and Dragon in the United Kingdom and at how they relate to the United States. Despite the dramatic growth in the emerging speech recognition market, a number of UK firms that have invested heavily in added-value sales with IBM or Dragon speech technology have been forced out of existence. AllVoice has just completed a project part-funded by the DTI involving automatic speech recognition over the telephone. One Department, which has seen the prototype, has calculated that AllVoice's innovation could save it more than £3 million a year. Unfortunately, the US litigation has deprived AllVoice of the funds that it should have had to turn a finished piece of development into a marketable product range. The Government must ensure that that innovation, and the savings that the UK Government could make, are not lost through US behaviour.

The Minister has an opportunity today to stand four-square by British innovation and excellence and by our sense of decency and fair play. That is what the public would expect of the Government. I cannot imagine for one moment that the Minister will not have considerable sympathy with the matter that I have described to the Chamber today.

1.45 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I thank the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) for raising this issue, which is clearly of enormous concern to AllVoice and to the hon. Gentleman, who is the relevant constituency Member of Parliament. I congratulate him on giving such a full account of the company's concerns.

The hon. Gentleman rightly acknowledged that I cannot comment on the details of an individual court case–it would be improper of me to do so, regardless of the jurisdiction in which the case was being heard. I also cannot give details of the contact and support that the Department of Trade and Industry offered to the company, because that is a matter of commercial confidentiality. None the less, I hope that I can help the hon. Gentleman and the company.

The hon. Gentleman discussed possible delays in proceedings in America. I have no standing whatsoever in the American judicial system. I shall ask our officials in the British embassy in Washington to establish the full details of the case and, perhaps, to seek legal advice about taking further action. I shall also ask to be given a personal report on the result of those inquiries.

It might help if I confirm that AllVoice was the beneficiary of two grants from my Department relating to speech recognition technology. In December 1996, it was awarded a grant under the SPUR–support for products under research–scheme, which has been replaced by the small firms merit award for research and technology. In November 1998, the company received a second SMART award. I understand, and the hon. Gentleman confirmed, that significant provision was made in both grants to cover the cost of protecting intellectual property rights.

Since then, Government officials have been in regular contact with the company–indeed, we have been in touch over the past few days. We are aware of the pressures that are on the company, which the hon. Gentleman described, and we have been flexible about its undertaking to exploit the research that we supported. The possibility of a further joint university project was kept open–that would involve the company in the further development of speech recognition technology.

The case that the hon. Gentleman described raises issues that are becoming increasingly important as our economy is transformed by information and communications technology. One of the most striking features of the impact of the new technologies on the economy is the speed of innovation. The Department of Trade and Industry and, more broadly, the Government are determined to ensure that industries in this country contribute fully to the development and exploitation of those new technologies. That will allow the United Kingdom to generate new companies, jobs, products and services and, ultimately, a better quality and standard of life for everyone. As part of that strategy, we support the development of ground-breaking technologies that could contribute to economic growth.

The hon. Gentleman rightly began by saying that speech recognition technology is hugely important to the development of computer technology. In particular, it opens up the possibility of creating a friendlier and more effective interface between the user and computer technology. All of us know, as users, that the current and earlier generations of computers are not easy or intuitive to use.

The United Kingdom is a leader in wireless technology. Indeed, we are currently holding the world's first auction for third generation mobile spectrum. Voice recognition technology will be critical in catching the next wave of wireless technology and ensuring that we build on our competitive edge in wireless technology to develop new businesses, new jobs and new wealth creation.

As part of that strategy we have sought to maximise the support available for UK-based firms from the European Union and we work with our European

[Ms Patricia Hewitt]

partners at the leading edge of information society developments—for instance through the European fifth framework programme. That programme, which is funded by all member state Governments, offers a budget of about half a billion pounds each year, from which I am glad to say that last year the UK industry received some £50 million. We are helping firms to take part in that programme to ensure, not least, that they exploit the immediate funding available and then continue to benefit from it.

Through that, through the SMART programme and through EUREKA and so on, we can support not just AllVoice but many innovative, high-technology companies in the United Kingdom. However, I am pleased to say that United Kingdom firms working in speech recognition and language technology won more than £750 million from the European fifth framework programme last year. Those firms and their European partners will work on a series of projects to extend the potential of spoken human language technology for mass market e-commerce, so that users can compare and buy services and products in their own language and in the form that they prefer. The firms will also develop multilingual delivery of information from a single source, tailored to highly personalised requirements with improved quality of speech synthesis. Therefore, with our European partners, we are making significant investments to try to sustain and build further competitive advantage for the United Kingdom.

In this fast-moving and highly competitive technical environment, intellectual property rights become hugely important. The more I talk to companies at the leading edge of the knowledge-driven economy, the more I hear from them that intellectual property rights and related issues around patenting, trademark, copyright and so on are at the top of the agenda for Governments and policymakers. Certainly the episode that the hon. Gentleman has highlighted underlines the need for leading-edge companies to establish a clear and well-directed intellectual property strategy from the outset. It is not always easy, and it certainly is not cheap, to obtain the necessary specialist advice. None the less, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the risks of not securing protection for intellectual property are enormous and the returns, therefore, from investing in the protection of successful innovation are very large.

There are huge complexities as laws on copyright—generally on intellectual property—are translated from the older economy to the new. It is not always easy for lawyers and courts to see how concepts that were developed for a different world and a different set of technologies translate into the new world. I make that as a general observation and in no sense as a comment on the specific case that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Mr. Nicholls: I am grateful to the Minister for the way in which she is responding. What she has said, particularly at the outset, is helpful, but will she comment on this proposition? In the case to which I referred the protection is already in place and has had to be referred to the American courts. Clearly neither she nor I can contemplate what the outcome of that litigation will be: that is a matter for the courts. We are not discussing the result of the injunction, because it may be refused, but is she as concerned as I am that injunctive relief is outstanding and has not been decided after 10 months? Will she tell her commercial officials that such matters concern her? I refer not to the decision but to the fact that no decision has been made. That must concern her, given the existence of patents.

Ms Hewitt: I have already said that I shall ask commercial officials at the embassy to investigate the matter. I have also asked DTI officials to look into the general issues raised by the case specifically to determine whether the United States is complying fully with its obligation to enforce patents and other intellectual property rights that are set out in the World Trade Organisation agreement on the trade-related aspects of intellectual property. That is the global framework for intellectual property issues and it is essential that all Governments who have signed the agreement abide by it.

It is also important to seek greater international harmonisation of intellectual property rights, because laws differ. They differ between the United States and the United Kingdom. The Government are playing an active role in seeking globalised norms to provide a more appropriate framework for what is increasingly a global and not a national or even regional knowledge-driven economy. We shall participate in the diplomatic conference for the adoption of a patent law treaty being held in Geneva next month. If we can obtain a successful outcome to that diplomatic conference, it will establish international harmonised standards for the procedures to be followed in patent formalities. A number of cases in different parts of the world have raised concerns about the nature of patents and whether they are granted too easily in some cases and not readily enough in others. We need some harmonisation of the procedures involved in patent formalities, which, in turn, will pave the way for more substantive issues of patent law.

The wider issue, which will not be resolved simply through harmonised legal substance or even improved legal procedures, is that, because information and communications technology is moving so fast and because of the intense competitive pressures on companies to innovate quickly, there is a danger that the brilliant idea or innovation of one company or individual will be taken over by a larger, better established, more powerful company. In the end, the answer is not simply to seek proper legal protection for the innovation and the intellectual property that resides in it, but to give away as little as possible and then to maintain constant innovation and investment in research and development. There is no guarantee in such a fast-moving world that a successful innovator will stay ahead of the game. The successful innovator might be lucky and remain ahead of the competition for 18 months or two years, but will then be taken over unless a new wave of innovation is introduced. The danger is that, unless the innovator keeps moving forward, someone else might take the idea or concept and engineer an application solution without having known how the innovator had done that in the first place. That may be done better, or it may not, but the person who gets to the market first will have the advantage. That is a general observation; it is not a specific observation of the AllVoice situation.

That is a problem particularly for small companies and individual innovators who might not even have created a company or taken the idea to market. The problem is how to protect an innovation and secure intellectual property rights, and then how to introduce them and maintain the competitive advantage.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Teignbridge for raising this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Two o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 10 April 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Marine Accidents Investigation Branch

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much funding was received by the Marine Accidents Investigation Branch in each of the last six years; and if he will make a statement on the resourcing of the Marine Investigation Branch. [116734]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The expenditure of the Marine Accidents Investigation Branch for the last six years has been:

Year	£
1994	831,840
1995	866,426
1996–97	913,337
1997–98	1,106,707
1998–99	1,579,266
1999–2000	1,284,218

In 1996 the accounting period changed from the calendar year to the financial year.

The Department keeps the funding of the Marine Accidents Investigation Branch under continuous review. The Department is examining alternative funding arrangements that will take account of the increase in the Branch's use of underwater surveys as a method of investigation.

Packaging Waste

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the timetable for the forthcoming review of the statutory registration fee structure for packaging waste compliance schemes. [117949]

Mr. Meacher: Work on the consultation is close to completion and we anticipate issuing it within the next few weeks.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research has been undertaken on the advantages and disadvantages of volume discounting of statutory fees, following the discount in statutory registration fees received by the largest packaging waste compliance scheme. [117950]

Mr. Meacher: The mechanism for calculating registration fees paid by compliance schemes to the Agencies—the scheme fee mechanism—under the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations was developed to reflect the costs to the Agencies of the functions which they carry out and was introduced following consultation in 1996. Concerns have been expressed to the Department that the assumptions underlying the scheme fee mechanism are not correct. The Department is therefore proposing to issue a consultation paper in which the advantages and disadvantages of different options will be discussed.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations his Department has received on the statutory registration fee structure for packaging waste compliance schemes. [117948]

Mr. Meacher: Following representations from some compliance schemes, the Environment Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, my Department is preparing a consultation paper on the mechanism used to calculate the registration fees paid by compliance schemes under the Producer Responsibility Obligation (Packaging Waste) Regulations. The paper is being prepared in consultation with the Agencies and is due to be issued in the next few weeks. The Government are required by law to consult before making any changes to the regime. We will provide all interested parties with an opportunity to comment further on the issues involved.

Local Deprivation Index

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the index of local deprivation, indicating the numbers which were *(a)* in favour of the new proposals, *(b)* opposed to the new proposals and *(c)* requested the release of the underlying data used to compile the new index. [117932]

Ms Beverley Hughes: One hundred and twenty-five responses have been received from different areas and different organisations. 89 of these are in favour of the new proposals, 36 are opposed or raise concerns about aspects of the new proposals. 20 areas have requested the release of the underlying data.

RAF East Camp Site, Colindale

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make a decision on the planning issues arising from the RAF east camp site, Colindale. [117842]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State's consideration of this case is at an advanced stage and his decision will be issued shortly.

Brent Cross Extension Scheme

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received the inspector's report on the planning inquiry into the Brent Cross extension scheme; and when he expects to make a decision. [117843]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State received the Inspector's report last December and issued his decision on 6 April. I have sent a copy of the decision letter to my hon. Friend.

Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods (Regeneration)

Mr. Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what encouragement his Department is providing for the regeneration of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. [117869]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A framework version of our national strategy for the regeneration of deprived communities will be published shortly, with a final version emerging later in the year. In the meantime, new ideas, new approaches and existing best practice are already being identified with our New Deal for Communities partnerships, one of which is now forming for the Marsh Farm Estate in Luton, and with other regeneration partnerships across the country.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was spent on assisting asylum seekers *(a)* directly and *(b)* indirectly by local authorities in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999 to date. [117859]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* Information concerning local authority direct or indirect expenditure on asylum seekers is not centrally available. Relevant grants paid to local authorities in England by the Department of Health and the Home Office are in the table:

Central Government Asylum Seekers Special Grants to English Local Authorities

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Adults/Families Grant (DH)[1]	9.8	68.0	169.9	[2]7.2
Asylum Seekers Support Grant (HO)	—	—	—	[3]303.9
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children's (UASC) Grant (DH)	3.0	1.6	20.2	52.2

[1] These grants became the responsibility of the Home Office in 1999–2000.

[2] Payments in respect of audited accounts for 1998–99.

[3] This includes £82 million which has not yet been paid to authorities.

Note:

1998–99 and 1999–2000 subject to audit reconciliation.

Rough Sleepers

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on average how many people slept on the streets each night in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* England and *(c)* Scotland in the last year for which figures are available. [118226]

Mr. Mullin: On 15 December 1999 the Government published their latest estimate of the number of people sleeping rough in England. This estimate showed that, as at June 1999, there were 1,633 people sleeping rough on any one night, of which 635 were in Greater London. Copies of the estimate are available from the House Libraries.

Responsibility for the Rough Sleepers Initiative in Scotland is a devolved matter. I understand, however, that no such figures are available for Scotland, or on a UK wide basis.

Devon County Council

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from Devon county council concerning the excess spending over standard spending assessment for 2000–01 by the Devon and Cornwall Fire Service; and what response he has made to them. [118504]

Ms Armstrong: Cornwall has its own fire service. Devon has a Combined Fire Authority consisting of representatives from Devon, Plymouth and Torbay. Devon county council's representation on the provisional local government finance settlement for 2000–01 drew attention to the gap between Fire Standard Spending Assessment and the level of spending on the fire service. My officials' reply to the council told them that the Secretary of State would take their comments into consideration before taking his final decisions on the settlement. This he did.

Radiation

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to issue advice to nuclear regulators and operators on the provisions of Euratom Directive 96/29 on radiological protection requiring the calculation of collective doses in respect of practices giving rise to radiation exposures. [117163]

Mr. Meacher: My Department is currently preparing guidance to the Environment Agency on the regulation of radioactive discharges into the environment from nuclear licensed sites. The calculation of collective doses will be one of the issues for consideration during the preparation of that guidance. When the guidance has been completed in draft, it will be issued for public consultation.

National Assembly for Wales

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects his Department to publish a concordat with the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales. [118741]

Ms Armstrong: I am pleased to say that we have now reached agreement with the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales on the terms of a concordat between us. This has been published today, and copies have been placed in the House Library. The concordat will also be made available in due course on the Department's website.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with London Underground concerning the possible upgrading of the underground stations serving the new Wembley National Stadium. [118419]

Mr. Hill: Discussions with London Underground are being co-ordinated by the Wembley Task Force as part of their brief to facilitate the regeneration of the stadium area and the wider estate. DETR officials are involved as observers. A scheme to improve Wembley Park station, to serve the new National Stadium, is being prepared by London Underground in close liaison with the Task Force.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with *(a)* the DCMS, *(b)* Brent Council, *(c)* the Wembley Task Force and *(d)* Wembley National Stadium Ltd. concerning regeneration funding for infrastructure improvement around the new Wembley National Stadium. [118418]

Mr. Hill: Wembley Task Force has been established at the initiative of English Partnerships to facilitate the regeneration of the Stadium area and the wider estate. Membership of the Task Force includes Brent council and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. Officials from DETR and DCMS are also involved. There is close liaison between all the parties involved. The Task Force is preparing a development framework for the area to guide the regeneration strategy and determine the infrastructure improvements required.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the European Commission about rebates to industries which will pay the Climate Change Levy; and if he will make a statement. [118427]

Mr. Meacher: The Climate Change Levy was one of the subjects discussed in a recent meeting with Commissioner Wallstrom. In addition, my officials have had meetings with the European Commission to discuss the UK's state aids notification in respect of the proposed reduction in the Climate Change Levy for companies which deliver significant environmental benefits under the Climate Change Levy Agreements.

Whaling

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to raise the issue of whaling with the Japanese Government at this year's G8 summit in Okinawa. [118361]

Mr. Meacher: We do not believe there is justification for any whaling, other than some subsistence whaling by indigenous people. We would like to see all other forms of whaling ended through a permanent, worldwide ban. We strongly believe that all discussions on whaling should be left to the International Whaling Commission as the primary international body for dealing with the management and conservation of whales, and we firmly support their current moratorium.

The Japanese Government are fully aware of these views. Whaling is regularly raised at official and ministerial meetings with them, and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), wrote to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in December 1999 to protest at Japan's so-called "scientific whaling" and reiterate the UK's position. The Government have no plans to raise the issue of whaling with them at the G8 summit on 21–23 July. However, as the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), explained to the House on 21 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 167WH, we shall be firmly resisting Japanese attempts to downgrade the protection given to whales both at the CITES Conference of Parties on 10–20 April and at the IWC meeting on 3–6 July.

HEALTH

Correspondence

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk of 27 January 2000, regarding the number of intensive care beds at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. [117862]

Mr. Milburn: I will let the right hon. Member have a reply shortly.

Cancer Surgery (North-west)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to announce a designated centre for cancer surgery for the north-west. [116751]

Yvette Cooper: The North West Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive is developing three cancer services networks across Merseyside and Cheshire, Lancashire and South Cumbria and Greater Manchester, comprising cancer centres for oncology and their associated cancer units. This is consistent with the approach that has been adopted by the National Cancer Director and is supported by him.

Cancer surgery for common cancers will continue to be carried out in designated local cancer units. Given the complex distribution of surgery for less common and rare cancers within each cancer network, it will not always be appropriate to designate a single hospital within each network for surgery for these cancers. Surgery for the less common and rare cancers in the north-west will be provided in accordance with national guidance, within managed clinical networks which will comprise a cluster of hospitals working with their associated oncology centre. Different hospitals may lead on surgery for specific cancers within this less common and rare group.

This approach was acknowledged in the original Calman/Hine report to be necessary in some parts of the country, and is consistent with that already adopted in other parts of the country.

Waterhouse Report

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 60W, for what reasons he was unable to act prior to presentation of the Waterhouse Report to Parliament to extend the Consultancy Index to include people named in that report. [116951]

Mr. Hutton: The Waterhouse Report is over 1,000 pages long and names hundreds of individuals with no easy means of identifying specific individuals and the findings made against them. The conclusions of the

Tribunal in relation to each of the individuals named had to be considered with great care by the Wales Office, Department of Health and other Government Departments to ensure that appropriate action was taken in the light of these conclusions. It was also important to establish the legal basis on which the Consultancy Index could be specially extended to include the names of people who had not been referred by their employer. We took immediate and determined action on receipt of the Waterhouse Report to achieve these tasks.

Vacant Doctor Posts

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacant posts there are for doctors; and how many vacant posts there were in each of the last five years. [117211]

Mr. Denham: The Department recruitment, retention and vacancies survey showed 530 medical and dental whole-time equivalent vacancies (excluding training grades) in the hospital and community health services sector in England that had lasted three months or more.

There has only been one recruitment and vacancy survey carried out and there is no historic information available.

Student Nurses

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have entered student nurse training in Northamptonshire since May 1997. [117607]

Mr. Denham: The table shows the number of people who have entered nurse training in Northamptonshire since May 1997.

	September 1997	*March 1998*	*September 1998*	*March 1999*	*September 1999*	*March 2000*
Adult Nursing	54	50	64	56	75	53
Children's Nursing	0	15	0	20	13	10
Mental Health	15	15	18	17	19	26
Learning Disabilities	8	7	10	10	10	17
Midwifery	20	0	20	0	12	22
Total	97	87	112	103	129	128

A total of 106 nurses have entered "Return to Practice" courses since 1998–99.

Meningitis Vaccinations

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* babies and *(b)* school children aged 15 to 17 years have been vaccinated with meningococcal group C conjugate vaccine under the current immunisation programme. [117637]

Yvette Cooper: Information on uptake of the new meningococcal Group C conjugate vaccine in babies and in school children aged 15 to 17 years will not be available till later this year, but anecdotal evidence suggests that between 80 and 95 per cent. of 15 to 17-year-olds have been immunised, with uptake in babies even higher.

Breast Screening

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will provide funding within the allocation for the breast screening service for self-referrals for women above the age of 65 years. [117634]

Yvette Cooper: Funding for the National Health Service Breast Screening Programme is included in health authority allocations and is not separately earmarked. The Forrest report, on which the programme is based, assumed that 10 per cent. of screens would be carried out on women who self-refer. In 1998–99, 88,119 women aged 65 and over were screened within the programme, representing 7.2 per cent. of all screens.

Women aged 65 and over are offered free three yearly screening on request. Women who have already participated in the programme are informed of this entitlement.

NHS Aids

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* walking sticks, *(b)* wigs, *(c)* crutches, *(d)* zimmer frames and *(e)* other aids were issued to NHS patients in the last 12 months for which figures are available; and how many, and what percentage, were returned to the NHS following the patients' recovery or death. [117605]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department issues on monitoring the suitability of disability equipment after it has been issued. [117830]

Mr. Hutton: In 1998 the Department of Health sponsored the Disabled Living Centres Council to produce 'Community Equipment Services . . . why should we Care?', a guide to good practice in disability equipment services, which was distributed to councils and the NHS. This recommends that there should be effective arrangements to review the suitability of disability equipment after it has been issued. The Department is funding the Council to promote this guidance through conferences and the development of an internet website.

We recognise that review arrangements are often unsatisfactory. Our guidance on Fair Access to Care Services (to be issued for consultation in May) will stress the importance of local authorities reviewing services, including disability equipment to ensure its continued suitability.

Morning-after Pill

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the compatibility of the pilot scheme in the Manchester, Salford and Trafford

Health Action Zone, for provision of the morning-after pill, with the preconditions laid down in Gillick *v.* West Norfolk and Wisbech area health authority. [118017]

Yvette Cooper: Any young woman, aged under 16, seeking emergency contraception without parental knowledge or consent from one of the pharmacists operating in the pilot must be assessed by the pharmacist in relation to the criteria set out in the Gillick judgment. This covers the young person's understanding, maturity and their best interests including physical and mental health. It is for the pharmacist to use his or her judgment as to whether the criteria are satisfied. If necessary, the pharmacist can seek further advice from a doctor and refer the young person on to specialist contraceptive services.

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the pilot scheme in the Manchester, Salford and Trafford Health Action Zone; under which pharmacists provide the morning-after pill to girls under 16 years. [118014]

Yvette Cooper: This scheme is being closely monitored by the Project Steering Group, Manchester, Salford and Trafford Health Authorities along with the Health Action Zone. The North West Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive is being kept fully informed of developments.

In total there are 16 community pharmacies currently participating in this scheme. Nine are from Manchester and the remaining six are from Salford and Trafford.

Therapeutic Cloning

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who is responsible for the appointment of the members of the Chief Medical Officer's Expert Working Group on Therapeutic Cloning. [118015]

Yvette Cooper: Appointments to the Expert Group on Therapeutic Cloning were made by the Chief Medical Officer in consultation with Sir Robert May, the Chief Scientific Adviser, taking into account the guidance paper "Use of Scientific Advice in Policy Making", and after consultation with the Royal Society and Royal Society of Medicine.

Water Fluoridation

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which water companies in the United Kingdom add fluoride to water; what notification his Department has received of the reasons why other companies have refused to add fluoride; and what steps are being taken to overcome obstacles to fluoridation. [118006]

Yvette Cooper: Fluoridated water is currently provided by Anglian Water Services Ltd., Northumbrian Water Ltd., North West Water Ltd., Severn Trent Water Ltd. and South Staffordshire Water plc. No water company has acceded to a request from a health authority to fluoridate its water supply since 1985. We understand that the water companies are reluctant to disregard the views of a minority of people opposed to water fluoridation. The National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, University of York is undertaking a review into fluoride and health. If it finds that there are significant benefits and no risks we will consider if water companies can be put under an obligation to fluoridate where there is strong local support for doing so.

Dental Services

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to encourage practising dentists to take part in postgraduate training. [117944]

Mr. Hutton: Dentists practising in the general dental services are already required by their terms of service to take reasonable steps to develop professional knowledge and skills to maintain an up-to-date knowledge of dental science and practice. Principal dentists are entitled to claim postgraduate education allowance for up to two sessions of approved postgraduate activity each year to help meet that requirement. The General Dental Council is to introduce a recertification scheme that will make the continued registration of all dentists dependent upon their regular participation in continuing education. In the first instance, the scheme will be voluntary, but the Council has asked the Department if, in due course, it could be made mandatory by amendment to the Dentists Act 1984. We support the principle of the scheme and will be responding on the detail shortly.

Laming Inquiry

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what (1) representations he has received from relatives of victims of Dr. Shipman on the rules under which the Laming Inquiry will be held; and if he will make a statement; [117951]

(2) if relatives of victims giving evidence to the Laming Inquiry will be allowed legal representation. [117952]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received representations from a firm of solicitors, Alexander Harris, representing a number of the relatives and friends of the victims of Dr. Shipman.

The Inquiry was established under the powers of the Secretary of State as defined in section 2 of the NHS Act 1977. A letter from my right hon. Friend addressed to Lord Laming of Tewin detailing the rules under which the Inquiry is to be conducted has been placed in the Library. It is within the gift of the chairman of the Inquiry to determine whether or not those making representations to the Inquiry are legally represented.

It is important that the independent Inquiry offers the relatives of the victims of Harold Shipman, including the relatives of people whose cases may not have been brought to trial, the opportunity to make their views known to the Inquiry. In addition, the Inquiry has now written to the families and friends of all the victims identified by the police, inviting them—within the scope of the Inquiry—to inform the Inquiry of their particular circumstances surrounding the death of their relative or friend.

Waiting Lists (Mid-Essex)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* total number of patients waiting for

hospital treatment and *(b)* number of patients waiting 12 months or more for treatment, in the Mid-Essex Hospital Trust area. [118079]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The total number of patients waiting and the number of patients waiting over 12 months for hospital treatment at Mid-Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust in February 2000 is:

February 2000	*Patients*
Total waiting	10,416
Number waiting over 12 months	1,060

Source:
Monthly waiting list return

Health Authority Chief Executives (Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost in the most recent year for which figures are available to the Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority of the employment of its chief executives. [118490]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is provided in the table:

Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority
Authority members remuneration—chief executive 1998–99

	£
Basic salary	76,000
Performance related bonuses	5,000
Pension contributions	6,000
Total remuneration	87,000

Source:
Health authority accounts 1998–99

Mental Health

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the report entitled, "Improving Care for Detained Patients from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities", by the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health and University of Central Lancashire. [118416]

Mr. Hutton: We welcome this report, which provides detailed information about the care of black and ethnic minority detained patients and which will help to inform the implementation of the National Service Framework for Mental Health. The report will be given careful consideration.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received on the recommendation of the expert committee set up to review the Mental Health Act 1983 that a statutory right to advocacy be created; [117864]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of introducing a legal right to an advocate for any person subject to compulsion under the Mental Health Act 1983; [117863]

(3) what research he has commissioned into models of good practice for advocacy schemes following the Review of the Mental Health Act 1983; and if he will make a statement. [117865]

Mr. Hutton: The consultation period on the Green Paper "Reform of the Mental Health Act 1983" ended on 31 March 2000. We have received a large number of responses on a wide range of issues in the Green Paper, including advocacy, which we are currently analysing. We will be undertaking work to determine models of good practice for advocacy in due course and will consider questions of practicality and cost in the light of this work and the responses to the Green Paper consultation.

Food-related Illnesses

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost to the NHS of treating food-related illnesses for each of the last five years for which figures are available. [118296]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* No specific figures are available on the cost to the National Health Service of treating food-related illnesses. As a result of a study in 1994–95, we have a good estimate of the total number of cases of infectious intestinal disease, but it is not possible to say what proportion of this is foodborne. The figures below, based on the study, suggest that the costs to the NHS in England and Wales of treating illness due to the major food poisoning bacteria *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* alone was:

	£ million
1995	22.9
1996	22.6
1997	26.1
1998	29.6
1999	27.8

It needs to be stressed, however, that as these figures are not routinely collected, the information is an estimate based on the most recently available figures, and solely on a study undertaken several years ago.

Bed Availability

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 351W, concerning bed availability, if the 1998–99 figures are the starting point against which any targets he sets for bed numbers will be measured. [118090]

Mr. Denham: The National Beds Inquiry used 1998–99 data as the basis for projections. No targets have been set. The report of the National Beds Inquiry is out for consultation until 15 May 2000.

Nursing

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements have been made to ensure nurses are represented on the five project areas to modernise the NHS. [117349]

Mr. Denham: I announced membership of the modernisation action teams on Tuesday 4 April. Nurses are well represented on all six groups.

Overseas Ministerial Visits

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the overseas ministerial visits that have taken place since May 1997, indicating the purpose of each visit. [112770]

Ms Stuart *[pursuant to her reply, 13 March 2000, c. 62W]:* I regret that there was an error in my previous reply.

Between May 1997 and March 2000 Department of Health Ministers have made 44 overseas visits in an official capacity as listed. All travel complied with the requirements of the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Management Code.

Minister	*Country*	*Date*	*Purpose*
Minister for Public Health	Netherlands/ Luxembourg	3–6 June 1997	Visit to European Union Health Council
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	4–6 June 1997	European Social Services Conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Austria	16–18 June 1997	Attendance at Council of Europe XVth Conference of Family Ministers and other engagements
Minister for Public Health	Belgium	9 July 1997	To discuss tobacco advertising
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Italy	26–28 September 1997	Pontignano conference and relations in Europe, welfare reform and single currency
Minister for Public Health	Italy	26–28 September 1997	Pontignano conference and relations in Europe, welfare reform and single currency
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	23–25 October 1997	Attendance at Young People's Conference on Sexual Health
Minister for Public Health	Belgium	30 October 1997	To meet members of the European Union Parliament
Minister for Public Health	France	24 November 1997	Meeting with French Health Minister
Minister for Public Health	Belgium	3–4 December 1997	European Union Health Council Meeting
Secretary of State	Denmark	26 February-1 March 1998	Visit to World Health Organisation and other engagements
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	USA	4–7 March 1998	Attendance at External Advisory Panel for Health, Nutrition and Population
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	8–10 March 1998	European Union Health Council meeting
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	24–26 March 1998	European Union Health Council meeting
Secretary of State	Belgium	22 April 1998	Visit to European Parliament to address Health Committee
Minister for Public Health	Belgium	22 April 1998	Visit to European Parliament to address Health Committee
Minister for Public Health	Luxembourg	29–30 April 1998	Meeting of the European Union Health Council
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	France	11 May 1998	Meeting of the Club of Three sub group
Minister for Public Health	Switzerland	12–13 May 1998	Attendance at World Health Assembly
Secretary of State	Germany	3–4 June 1998	Attendance at Social Services Conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Sweden	16–17 June 1998	Attendance at presentation of the FINSAM Project and other engagements
Secretary of State	France	22–23 June 1998	Representing Her Majesty's Government at England v Romania World Cup match
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Australia	9–20 July 1998	Fact finding mission on mental health issues
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Sweden	23–25 September 1998	Keynote speech at 50th anniversary Swedish social services conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Germany	3–5 October 1998	British Council Seminar

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Minister	Country	Date	Purpose
Secretary of State	South Africa	3–18 October 1998	Combined official visit to South Africa to support Department For International Development projects and pursue bilateral health relations
Secretary of State	USA	21–23 October 1998	Attendance at International Symposium on Healthcare and other engagements
Minister for Public Health	Belgium	12 November 1998	Meeting of European Union Health Council
Secretary of State	Barbados	15–18 November 1998	Attendance at Commonwealth Health Ministers Conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Japan	25–29 November 1998	British Healthcare industry export promotion
Minister for Public Health	France	14–16 January 1999	Meeting with French Ministers for Health and Women and attendance at Franco-British Colloque events
Minister for Public Health	USA	15–19 March 1999	Attendance at International conference on Children and Tobacco
Secretary of State	Denmark	9–11 April 1999	Meeting with senior officials from the European Office of the World Health Organisation
Minister for Public Health	Italy	15 April 1999	Meeting on Working Times Directive and junior doctors hours
Minister for Public Health	Greece	22–23 April 1999	Conference of European Health ministers
Secretary of State	Switzerland	15–18 May 1999	Commonwealth Health ministers meeting and World Health Assembly
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	Italy	26–27 May 1999	Conference on emergency services and reanimation
Minister for Public Health	Luxembourg	7–8 June 1999	European Union Health Council Meeting
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	France	17 June 1999	European Social Services Conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	Malaysia	5–9 October 1999	British Healthcare industry export promotion
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health	Turkey	10–11 October 1999	Conference on Diabetes Care and Research in Europe
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	USA	10–12 October 1999	International Initiative Seminar on Building Strong Communications to Support Families
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health	Finland	12–13 October 1999	Representing United Kingdom at European Union Presidency meeting
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health	Belgium	17–18 November 1999	European Union Health Council Meeting

DEFENCE

Service Accommodation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Army, *(b)* Navy and *(c)* RAF officers live in privately-rented accommodation funded by his Department; how much this has cost in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [118060]

Dr. Moonie: It is a condition of service that Service personnel are provided with publicly funded accommodation at or within an appropriate distance from their place of duty. When family and single accommodation is not available, suitable equivalent property is rented from the commercial rental market. Until 1 February 1997, MOD satisfied this requirement in GB through the payment of an allowance to personnel to enable them to find rented accommodation under private arrangements (Excess Rent Allowance for family accommodation and Lodging Allowance for single accommodation). However, with effect from 1 February 1997, MOD established an Accommodation Agency which utilises an MOD contractor to obtain equivalent rented accommodation for Service personnel. This has since superseded the allowance regimes.

As at 31 March 2000, there were 1,943 officers in occupation of rented family and single accommodation in GB. The breakdown by Service is as follows:

	Number
RN	876
Army	709
RAF	358
Total	1,943

The cost to the Department of providing rented accommodation throughout GB is only available for the last three Financial Years following the formation of the Defence Housing Executive and the MOD Accommodation Agency, and these are summarised in the table. The figures represent the full cost of providing rented accommodation for all ranks since it is not possible to extract the costs for officers alone. Prior to FY 1997–98 costs for Excess Rent Allowance and Lodging Allowance were met by respective budget holders. This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost:

	£ million
Financial year	*Total cost per FY*
1997–98	44.9
1998–99	45.5
1999–2000[1]	49.8

[1] Estimated

Chinook Helicopters

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the improved actuators were fitted to the RAF Chinook fleet; and if he will make a statement. [118099]

Mr. Spellar: All RAF Chinooks had an improved standard of actuator fitted during conversion to HC Mk2.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the US authorities have determined the cause of the incident involving a US Army Chinook helicopter on 11 April 1997; and if he will make a statement. [118064]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my predecessor gave him on 14 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 230W, which explained that my Department had evaluated an extract from the US Army investigation report into this incident. However the content of the report, and its conclusions are a matter for the US authorities.

South Africa

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of Her Majesty's armed forces are acting as military advisers in South Africa; if their responsibilities include advice to the Government of Zimbabwe; what terms of reference they have; and if he will place relevant items in the Library. [118294]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* A British Military Advisory Training Team (BMATT), currently comprising 16 armed forces personnel, has been providing advice to the South Africans since 1994 on the integration of former statutory and non-statutory forces into the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The team helps to validate standards; monitor training; and adjudicate in disputes. Its responsibilities do not include advice to the Government of Zimbabwe. The detail of the terms under which the BMATT operates is subject to a confidential agreement between the UK and South African governments.

General Service Medal

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the deployments or campaigns involving British Armed Forces *(a)* from 1990 to 2000, *(b)* from 1980 to 1989 and *(c)* from 1970 to 1979, for which the General Service Medal has been awarded. [118234]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The deployments and campaigns involving British Armed Forces for which a clasp to the General Service Medal 1962 has been awarded are as follows:

(a) 1990 to 2000

Clasp Kuwait for service between 8 March 1991 and 30 September 1991 inclusive.

Clasp Northern Iraq and Southern Turkey for service between 6 April 1991 and 17 July 1991 inclusive.

Clasp Air Operations Iraq for service between 16 July 1991 and a date to be agreed.

(b) 1980 to 1989

Clasp Lebanon for service between 7 February 1983 and 9 March 1984 inclusive.

Clasp Mine Clearance—Gulf of Suez for service between 15 August 1984 and 15 October 1984 inclusive.

Clasp Gulf for service between 17 November 1986 and 31 October 1988 and for continuing Mine Counter Measures Operations within the Gulf between 1 November 1988 and 28 February 1989 inclusive.

(c) 1970 to 1979

Clasp Northern Ireland for service between 14 August 1969 and a date to be agreed.

Clasp Dhofar for service between 1 October 1969 and 30 September 1976 inclusive.

Serle's House

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will enter into negotiations with Hampshire county council on the purchase of the remembrance garden at Serle's House, Winchester. [118367]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) on 16 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 282W, and to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 718. I expect to be able to take a final view shortly, once I have been able to consider fully all of the issues involved.

Burma Railway Memorial

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent representations he has received concerning funding for a memorial on the Burma Railway for British servicemen who lost their lives whilst prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War; and if he will make a statement. [117938]

Dr. Moonie: My Department has not received any recent representations on this subject. It has been a long-standing policy of successive Governments that the cost of memorials is not usually met from public funds, but from private donations or public subscriptions.

Heavy-lift Aircraft

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how transport to Saudi Arabia would differ from present arrangements following the purchase of *(a)* the Antonov 124 and *(b)* the Boeing C17. [116499]

Dr. Moonie: Currently there are two C-130 and one VC10 resupply flights to Saudi Arabia every week; these flights also serve Kuwait in their schedule. If the Antonov An-124 were employed, it could substitute for the two C-130s, but the VC10 would have to be maintained for passengers. As the C-17 can also carry passengers, only one C-17 flight per week would be necessary to meet the total requirement.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how *(a)* refuelling and *(b)* diversion arrangements would differ from those which currently apply, in respect of transport to the Falklands, following the purchase of (i) the Antonov 124 and (ii) the Boeing C17. [116498]

Dr. Moonie: The current six Tristar C2 passenger and one Tristar KC1 freighter flights to the Falkland Islands all refuel at Ascension Island and rely on Rio de Janeiro or Montevideo for their diversions. If the Antonov An-124 or the Boeing C-17 were used in place of the Tristar KC1 freighter, the present refuelling and diversion arrangements would not change.

Iraq

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the targets by type engaged by the Royal Air Force over Iraq in 1999. [117567]

Mr. Hoon: In response to Iraqi threats to coalition aircraft, RAF aircraft took action, in self-defence, against 36 targets in Iraq during 1999. All targets were part of the Iraqi Integrated Air Defence System and included Anti-Aircraft Artillery, Surface-to-Air Missiles and Military Command and Control facilities.

Injunctions

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many injunctions are in force to prevent the publication of materials deemed potentially harmful to the national interest; if he will list the publishers against which injunctions are in force; and if he will list the titles, publications and authors so affected. [117260]

Mr. Spellar: There are nine temporary injunctions currently in force which were applied for by the Ministry of Defence against authors or publishers in relation to the disclosure of material harmful to national security or in breach of confidentiality obligations owed to the MOD. I am withholding further information under exemptions 4 and 14 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

British Irish Rights Watch

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will summarise the principal arguments he has advanced in response to the submission of British Irish Rights Watch to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression concerning allegations made by Mr. Martin Ingram; and if he will place a copy of his full response in the Library. [117261]

Mr. Spellar: The Government have not seen any submission from British Irish Rights Watch to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and therefore have not prepared a response.

Sectarian Harassment Policy (Northern Ireland)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library *(a)* the Northern Ireland Sectarian Harassment Policy and Guidelines and *(b)* Standing Orders of the General Service Battalion of the RIR (i) prohibiting a display of paramilitary insignia and emblems, (ii) on sectarian harassment and procedures and (iii) on improper retention of photographic or other material to which access is granted in the course of official duties. [117265]

Mr. Spellar: I have made arrangements for copies of the text of the documents to be placed in the Library of the House.

TREASURY

Youth Unemployment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out the figures underlying Chart 3, on long-term youth unemployment, in the Treasury paper "The Goal of Full Employment: Employment Opportunities for all Throughout Britain", published in February. [116852]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 4 April 2000]:* The figures refer to those aged 18–24 claimant unemployed for six months or longer. Since the data are not seasonally adjusted a moving average over one year was taken to smooth out seasonality. Prior to 1995 data are available only quarterly and missing months were estimated by interpolation. The figures for December, being representative of each year, are shown in the table.

Long-term youth unemployment[1]

Year	*Number*
1979	114,864
1980	146,645
1981	327,438
1982	453,931
1983	486,239
1984	525,466
1985	527,531
1986	483,810
1987	398,838
1988	283,460
1989	193,960
1990	159,035
1991	238,320
1992	340,254
1993	370,381
1994	323,078

Long-term youth unemployment[1]

Year	*Number*
1995	270,308
1996	229,548
1997	146,793
1998	101,263
1999	58,651

[1] Those aged 18–24 claimant unemployed for six months or more. Figures refer to the average over the previous 12 months of non-seasonally adjusted data in December for each year.

Genetic Testing

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what role he plans for the Financial Services Ombudsman in the regulation of the use of genetic information by the insurance industry. [116567]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Financial Services Authority has recently consulted on this subject and will decide on its policy shortly.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Human Rights Legislation

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the number of additional court cases which will be brought in England and Wales *(a)* in the year to October 2001 and *(b)* subsequently in each year, as a result of the coming into force of provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 in October 2000; what the cost to public funds and the amount of court time taken up will be in (i) the High Court, (ii) the Court of Appeal and (iii) the House of Lords; and what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive regarding the operation of human rights legislation in Scotland. [118544]

Jane Kennedy: The Government anticipate that the vast majority of human rights points will be raised in existing cases, rather than new cases, save for applications for leave to move for Judicial Review which may rise from the 300 received in 1998 to 600 per year. We expect a significant number of human rights points to be raised in the months following implementation but it is anticipated that the level of challenges will reduce subsequently as the higher courts determine the basis on which the Act and Convention are to be applied.

The Government have made annual provision for the overall costs of implementing the Human Rights Act in the courts—£60 million, including £39 million for legal aid. In addition, £4.5 million has been set aside to ensure that all full and part-time judges, lay magistrates and their legal advisers are trained to deal with Convention points effectively, which should reduce the impact on court time.

On an annual basis, the High Court and Court of Appeal estimate that 2,300 to 2,800 extra sitting days would be required as a direct result of Human Rights Act cases, but the need for additional sittings will, in part, be offset by other changes in workload.

Officials in my Department have been, and remain, in contact with officials of the Scottish Executive to benefit from an understanding of how their business has been affected by human rights litigation.

PRIME MINISTER

Downing Street Records

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister in what form records are kept of persons visiting 10 Downing Street for meetings *(a)* with him and *(b)* with officials; and for how long such records have been maintained. [116924]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* There is no requirement for this information to be kept. Since February 1998 a visitor notification system has been kept for operational purposes of persons visiting 10 Downing Street. I have continued the practice of previous Prime Ministers of keeping an official diary which includes the names of my visitors. This is deposited in due course in the Public Record Office.

Press Office

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister what was the reason for his Press Officer's attendance at the 27 March Conference in Portsmouth on promoting Europe; and if he will deposit a copy of the Press Officer's speech in the Library. [118023]

The Prime Minister: No member of staff from my Office attended the Council of Europe Parliamentary and Public Relations Committee visit to Portsmouth from 25–28 March.

Strategic Communications Unit

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what has been the total cost so far of the Strategic Communications Unit, broken down by *(a)* salaries, *(b)* capital equipment and *(c)* other costs. [108898]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 8 February 2000]:* Expenditure for the Strategic Communications Unit (SCU) was £77,633 in 1997–98 (during which year the SCU was only functioning for approximately three months) and £716,672 in 1998–99. The budget for 1999–2000 is £839,440. The rise between expenditure in 1998–99 and the budget for 1999–2000 is principally due to the additional costs of the re-design and re-launch of the No. 10 internet site which included the replacement of outdated computer equipment and the creation of two additional established Civil Service posts. Savings have of course been made in other departments as a result of the transfer of work to the SCU and its role in providing consultancy services to departments which are not reflected in these figures.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when Mr. M. R. Bacon of Thanet will receive his Winter Fuel Payment. [118216]

Angela Eagle: We are unable to trace any record for Mr. Bacon without further information.

Deportees

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will introduce legislation to treat people who are deported to the UK as being habitually resident in the UK. [118799]

Mr. Bayley: We have today laid regulations that will automatically treat deportees, who may not otherwise be covered, as being habitually resident in the United Kingdom for the purposes of Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action is being taken by his Department to monitor the quality of advice given by SEMA Medical Service doctors about the awarding of Incapacity Benefit on the basis of scrutiny of documents without commissioning a medical examination. [118800]

Mr. Bayley: In February 1999, new guidelines for doctors undertaking scrutiny were produced by SEMA Medical Services and the Department's Chief Medical Adviser.

A recent survey by the Department's Medical Policy Group has shown that some Medical Services doctors are not following the scrutiny guidelines which means that some Incapacity Benefit awards may have been made incorrectly.

The Benefits Agency has written to SEMA Group's Director of Medical Services to instruct Medical Services to take corrective action immediately to ensure compliance with the medical quality standards specified in the contract.

SEMA has also been informed that the Department's Chief Medical Adviser will be carrying out further audits of the scrutiny process, to ensure that advice to award Incapacity Benefit on the basis of scrutiny, without medical examination, is given only where there is sufficient medical evidence already on file to justify it.

In addition, the Chief Medical Adviser's Medical Quality Surveillance Group is making arrangements for a joint audit, with Medical Services, of the standard of each individual doctor undertaking scrutiny. This exercise will begin next month.

Medical Services, through their own medical quality monitoring procedures, already identified some doctors who are not following the scrutiny guidelines and have instituted remedial training for them.

Personal Capacity Assessment

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on progress with the pilots for Personal Capacity Assessment. [118242]

Mr. Bayley: The Personal Capability Assessment replaced the All Work Test on 3 April. From that date, and initially only for people in the 12 ONE pilot areas, the examining doctor will produce not only a report on the claimant's incapacity, to inform the decision on benefit entitlement, but also a separate "capability report" with advice on what the person can do despite their medical condition and about assistance, such as workplace adaptations, that may enable them to work. These reports will be used by Personal Advisers to help claimants who want to plan a return to work. The new process is still at a very early stage but some feedback is available from the initial voluntary pilots that began last December, where claimants who wished to participate had a Capability Report prepared. The early indications are that the information in the reports is helpful to claimants and their Personal Advisers.

Family Statistics

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many adults living in poverty are *(a)* unmarried mothers and *(b)* divorced women. [117569]

Mr. Bayley: Poverty is a multi-dimensional problem which cannot be defined solely on the basis of a particular level of income. One indicator which may be used, however, is whether the income of the household is below 60 per cent. of median. The following table provides this information for unmarried and divorced women.

Number of unmarried mothers and divorced women living in households below 60 per cent. of median income, 1997–98

Million

	Before housing costs	*After housing costs*
Unmarried mothers	0.3	0.5
Divorced women with children	0.2	0.3
Divorced women without children	0.1	0.2

Notes:

1. All estimates are subject to sampling error or response biases.
2. Estimates of household income are presented both before and after housing costs in line with HBAI conventions.

Source:

Households Below Average Income (HBAI). Figures are drawn from the Family Resources Survey.

We are determined to tackle poverty and its causes. Work is the best route out of poverty. That is why we have introduced Welfare to Work programmes such as the ONE pilots and New Deals to advise all groups of working age people, including unmarried mothers and divorced women, about the options available to them and to help them into work. And through the introduction of the National Minimum Wage and tax and benefit reforms we are making sure that work pays. These programmes are working, producing results. For example, up to December 1999, 103,000 lone parents had volunteered to participate in the New Deal for Lone Parents and 35,000 had found work.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many divorced women without dependent children were in receipt of social security benefits in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980 and *(c)* 1999; and what was the cost of such benefits in each of those years. [117532]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available.

The Department does not routinely collect information on the marital status of benefit recipients.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117808]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested as records are held for two years only. Such information as is available is as follows.

As at 1 April 2000, this Department employed 111 Lawyers and in addition has seven Legal Trainees.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he plans to use local authority Housing Benefit data in order to identify pensioners who should receive letters as part of his Minimum Income Guarantee take-up campaign. [117871]

Mr. Bayley: As part of the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) take-up campaign we will be writing to around two million pensioners whom our records suggest are most likely to have underlying entitlement. This targeted group will be pensioners who our pension records suggest have incomes below the MIG level. We will also be using information from other available sources including Housing Benefit data.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his oral statement of 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 47, concerning the number of people who will benefit from stakeholder pensions, if he will set out the basis for the figure of five million. [118223]

Mr. Rooker: Our estimate of the target group of five million people for stakeholder pension schemes is based on the number of people earning between around £10,000 and £20,000 who are not in an occupational pension scheme. Some of those initially in this group will have personal pensions and will therefore be unlikely to take up stakeholder pensions when they are first introduced. But the majority are making no personal contributions to a private pension scheme.

People outside this target group will also benefit from stakeholder pension schemes. We expect that some people on higher earnings will want to join a stakeholder scheme and our decision to relax the rules linking earnings and pension contributions will mean that, for example, carers, women taking breaks from work, students and children will also be able to contribute.

The number of people actually taking out a stakeholder pension scheme will depend on how stakeholder and other pensions are marketed by providers, and on individual choices by savers.

Organophosphates

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims have been allowed for Disability Living Allowance to persons suffering from the toxic effects of the use of organophosphates in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [118400]

Mr. Bayley: This information is not available. Entitlement to Disability Living Allowance is based on the effects of disability on a person's care and mobility needs. The Department does not seek information about what has caused claimants' disabilities.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the impact on benefit payments in the next financial year of a single minimum wage for all age groups of *(a)* £4.00 per hour, *(b)* £4.20 per hour and *(c)* £4.50 per hour. [108674]

Angela Eagle *[pursuant to her reply, 8 February 2000,* c. 131W]: The information is in the table.

Estimated savings in 2000–01 on benefit payments of a National Minimum Wage of £4.00, £4.20 and £4.50

£ million

	£4.00	£4.20	£4.50
Income Support/JSA (IB)	−30	−50	−70
Housing Benefit	−50	−70	−100
Council Tax Benefit	−10	−15	−20
Total	−90	−135	−195

Notes:

1. Estimates based on 1996–97 Family Resources Survey data, uprated to 2000–01 prices and benefit rates.

2. Estimates rounded to the nearest £5 million. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

3. Estimates assume no secondary effects on employment or wages.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the cost of the Debt Accounting and Management System for Housing Benefit; and when was the installation cancelled. [118208]

Angela Eagle: Administration of benefits and recovery of overpayments are a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 7 April 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent question asking what was the cost of the Debt Accounting and Management System for housing benefit; and when the installation was cancelled.

The Debt Accounting and Management System (DAMS) was to provide integrated debt management and accounting capability for the Benefits Agency's programme debt. Housing Benefit is administered by local authorities and therefore was not part of the DAMS development.

Correspondence

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the hon. Member for Cunninghame, South will receive a reply to his letter of 8 November 1999 (Reference: C/ST/5638/RB/BHD). [117820]

Angela Eagle: A reply was sent on 3 December 1999.

Hospital Downrating

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have had their state pensions reduced as a result of hospital downrating; and what the total benefit savings were in (i) 1979, (ii) 1984, (iii) 1989, (iv) 1994 and (v) 1999. [117872]

Mr. Rooker: Information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

It is estimated that in 1999, the total reduction in benefit as a result of downrating was £60 million (to nearest £10 million). Figures for the earlier years are not available.

The number of people whose state pensions were reduced by hospital downrating on a specific date during each of the requested years

Thousand

Date	*All cases*
30 November 1979	90
31 March 1984	85
31 March 1989	66
31 March 1994	39
31 March 1999	32

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand
2. The benefit savings estimate assumes a constant stock of pensioner in-patients throughout the year

Disabled People

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what publicity he has given to recent changes in the Linking Rules for benefit for disabled people. [118241]

Mr. Bayley: In October 1998 we extended the linking period from eight weeks to 52 weeks for people leaving incapacity benefits to start work or training. Everyone who can gain from the protection is sent details about it. Details about the rule also appear in the appropriate Benefits Agency leaflets and guidance. In addition we have worked with some of the main welfare rights organisations to produce and promote guidance on the rules.

State Pensions

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people who became eligible for the basic state pension in December 1999 and January 2000 experienced a delay in obtaining their first pension payment. [118320]

Mr. Rooker: The number of people eligible to receive their basic pensions in December 1999 and January 2000 but who did not receive payment by their first pension pay day is not known and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

It is known, however, that some 37,000 claims were received in December, and 59,000 in January. Most of these people would not be eligible to receive their pension in those months, because Retirement Pension can be claimed up to four months in advance of the date pension is payable.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tourism and Culture (North-east)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to promote tourism and culture opportunities in the North-east. [117942]

Janet Anderson: The Northumbria Tourist Board (NTB) will receive £340,687 for tourism projects in the region from the English Tourism Council in 2000–01—an increase of 31 per cent. on the current year. These projects include the development of information and communications technology to improve regional competitiveness and deliver added value for tourism businesses, which will help promote tourism throughout the North-east. The region, in common with all parts of England, also benefits from the promotion work of the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which promotes Britain as a visitor destination in overseas markets. The BTA is receiving £37 million from my Department this year.

Tourism and culture in the North-east have also benefited, both directly and indirectly, from the National Lottery (3,083 projects in the region have received awards totalling £334,087,674 according to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's National Lottery Awards Database which uses information supplied by the distributing bodies).

We have also established Regional Cultural Consortiums in each of the regions in England to champion the whole spectrum of cultural and creative interests, including tourism. The consortium for the North-east met for the first time in December last year. It is currently preparing a regional cultural strategy which will be seeking to identify the key tourism and cultural opportunities and priorities. Regional Development Agencies are also a key part of Government's commitment to regional development. My Department has sought to ensure, in consultation with One North East, the RDA for the North-east, that the contribution that tourism and culture can make to the regional economy is fully acknowledged in the economic strategy.

London Hotels

Mr. Butterfill: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the average percentage increase in hotel room rates in Central London between March 1994 and March 2000. [117520]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 5 April 2000]:* The Government do not research and estimate average hotel room rates. However, I understand the information is available from travel and tourism consultancy firms.

Euro

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the effect membership of the euro would have on *(a)* the domestic tourism industry and *(b)* overseas visitors to the United Kingdom. [117927]

Janet Anderson: It is difficult to predict trends in visitor numbers and expenditure by tourists one year ahead, and we would be unwise to try to do so for the next

decade. We are not able to forecast the possible effects of exchange rates on the tourism industry in or out of the euro zone in this way.

We are working hard, however, to ensure that tourism businesses in the UK are fully informed about the euro and the introduction of euro currency. My Department chairs a working group which seeks to raise awareness of the impact of the euro on tourism businesses and to disseminate information to the industry.

Resorts Taskforce

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if the Resorts Taskforce will report on *(a)* health and safety, *(b)* employment, *(c)* environmental and *(d)* other regulations as they affect hotels and guest houses in seaside resorts; [117928]

(2) if the Resorts Taskforce will report on the effects of the six bed rule on small hotels and bed and breakfast establishments; [117921]

(3) if the Resorts Taskforce will report on the effects of UK *(a)* membership and *(b)* non-membership of the euro on (i) domestic tourism and (ii) foreign visitors to the UK; [117933]

(4) if the Resorts Taskforce will report on the effects of VAT rates on accommodation *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* in the UK's European competitors; [117934]

(5) if the Resorts Taskforce will report on the deregulation of dry rooms in licensed hotels. [117935]

Janet Anderson: The Resorts Taskforce has not been set up specifically to consider any of the above points, many of which apply more widely than just to resorts. However, I will draw them to the attention of the Taskforce chairman, Peter Moore, who is a board member of the English Tourism Council (ETC).

The Resorts Taskforce was set up by the ETC in response to "Tomorrow's Tourism", which sets out the regeneration of our traditional resorts as one of its 15 key action points. The Taskforce's remit is to suggest ways in which resorts can be repackaged for tourism purposes and to highlight examples of best practice in successful resort regeneration for tourism. In order to produce its report it will consider a range of issues, including the history of resorts, the problems they face now, other matters affecting them and possible solutions based on existing best practice and new ideas.

Tourism

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact of the value of the pound on the *(a)* domestic tourism industry and *(b)* number of overseas visitors to the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [117936]

Janet Anderson: UK residents spent 16 per cent. more and took 19 per cent. more trips within the UK in 1999 compared with 1998, according to the UK Tourism Survey. I am advised by the British Tourist Authority (BTA) that a strong economy and lower unemployment levels are likely to be among the factors which have been encouraging UK residents to take more holidays in Britain as well as abroad.

The number of overseas visitors to the UK in 1999 was the second highest on record, according to International Passenger Survey estimates. While sterling appreciated more substantially against the euro than it did against the US dollar, the number of visitors from North America and Western Europe remained about the same as in 1998. The value of sterling is one of many factors that overseas visitors take into account when deciding whether to visit Britain.

Digital Radio

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects digital radio to reach *(a)* 90 per cent., *(b)* 95 per cent. and *(c)* 100 per cent. of the UK population. [118194]

Janet Anderson: I understand from the BBC and the Radio Authority estimates, that national BBC services and the commercial services broadcast by Digital One each presently reach over 60 per cent. of the UK population. I also understand from the Radio Authority that Digital One plans to extend its services to over 85 per cent. over the next two years. Digital radio is at an early stage and plans for the further expansion of the national networks have yet to be developed.

National Lottery

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been awarded in National Lottery grants to finance CCTV schemes *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Gloucestershire; and if he will make a statement. [118214]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* Where Lottery funds are used to fund CCTV, CCTV is usually an element of a larger scheme. It is therefore not possible to identify separately how much Lottery money has been used to finance CCTV except at disproportionate cost.

My Department's National Lottery Awards Database shows only one award of £5,000 exclusively for CCTV. This award was not in Gloucestershire.

Museum Charges

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds, in the case of each of the national museums which currently charge adult entry fees, of reducing the entry fee to £1. [118257]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The overall cost is currently estimated at £7.1 million in 2001–02. Detailed allocations are subject to discussion with individual institutions.

Digital Television

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to ensure that communal aerials in social housing are upgraded to enable the tenants to purchase and use digital television and receive an adequate digital signal. [117585]

Janet Anderson: The installation of domestic television aerials is a matter for those responsible for individual properties. I appreciate that many consumers rely on shared aerial systems, over which they have no direct control. My officials are in touch with the ITC, the BBC, and the digital broadcasters to ensure that this does not present a significant obstacle to those consumers having access to digital television. I understand that many homes with shared aerial systems can obtain satisfactory reception of digital television using their existing receiving equipment. Where upgrades are required, I would encourage tenants or landlords to approach the digital broadcasters, the ITC or the BBC who can advise on how to achieve this in the most cost-effective manner.

Charleroi Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received regarding the suitability of the Charleroi Stadium for hosting the England *v* Germany football international. [117242]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport has received one representation on this subject, a letter from BBC Production.

National Athletics Stadium

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with Sport England about the development of a major athletics facility at Picketts Lock. [118115]

Kate Hoey: The Government have given no financial help or guarantees to UK Athletics to date. However, the Picketts Lock project is still at its very early stages and my officials remain in close contact with UK Athletics and Sport England to offer what non-financial assistance they can in taking forward the project.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what undertakings he gave to the International Amateur Athletics Federation about the development of an athletics stadium at Picketts Lock, Enfield, as a suitable venue for the World Athletics Championships 2005; and if he will make a statement. [118119]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State assured the IAAF that the Government would ensure that a suitable London stadium would be ready to stage the World Athletics Championships in 2005.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what undertakings he has received from Sport England on the availability of Lottery funding to finance the proposed athletics facility at Picketts Lock. [118118]

Kate Hoey: None. Sport England will assess any application for Lottery funds related to any athletics facility at Picketts Lock on its merits. However, Sport England are fully supportive of UK Athletics successful bid for the 2005 championships and have already given UK Athletics an in principle agreement to contribute £15 million towards event costs which was included in UK Athletics outline bid submitted to the IAAF.

Workplace Parking

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many workplace car parking spaces are available at the buildings used and controlled by his Department. [116763]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 30 March 2000]:* The number of workplace car parking spaces available at buildings used and controlled by my Department is 14. We have prepared a travel plan for all our key buildings in line with the commitment set out in the Transport White Paper and have reviewed the scope for reducing our car parking requirements in that context.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Compensation Claims

Mr. Barron: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the total payments made to date to each firm of solicitors in Yorkshire involved in the compensation claims for *(a)* chest disease and *(b)* vibration white finger. [118197]

Mrs. Liddell: Payments to firms in Yorkshire to date are as follows:

(a) Chest diseases

	£
Ashton Morton Slack	60,150
Attey Dibb & Clegg	9,483
Beresfords (incorporating R. A. Swift)	7,005
Burton Green Williamson	1,057
Frank Allen Pennington	2,567
Graysons	[1]410,387
Hickmotts	7,402
Hopkins	64,544
Irwin Mitchell	[2]3,798,443
John E. Millar & Co.	3,304
Keeble Hawson Moorhouse	44,779
Malcolm C. Foy & Co.	2,511
Nelson & Co.	13,405
Oxley & Coward	7,543
Raleys	362,772
Saffmans	15,788
Simpsons Millar	1,057
The Beaumont Partnership	2,115
Thompsons	56,065
Towells	[3]656,245
W. Brook & Co.	1,057

[1] This includes some £48,000 in respect of trial costs
[2] This includes some £3.6 million in respect of trial costs
[3] This includes £0.5 million in respect of trial costs

(b) Vibration white finger

	£
Arthur Jackson & Co.	1,896
Ashton Morton Slack	103,204
Atherton & Godfrey	7,796
Attey Dibb & Clegg	219,196
Bell Wright & Dallman	929
Beresfords (incorporating R. A. Swift)	15,803
Burton Green Williamson	1,193
Frank Allen Pennington	80,124
Graysons	114,591
Hickmotts	26,075
Ian Smith & Co.	806
Irwin Mitchell	[1]1,214,381
Jack Thornley & Partners	917

(b) Vibration white finger

	£
John E. Millar & Co.	5,130
Kate Patterson & Co.	5,916
Keeble Hawson Moorhouse	98,969
Kenyon Son & Craddock	705
Mills Kemp & Brown	4,400
Morrish & Co.	11,104
Newman & Bond	976
Noonan & Co.	1,202
Oxley & Coward	223,086
Parker Rhodes	13,154
Peace & Co.	2,459
Raleys	535,649
Rowley Ashworth	2,215
Saffmans	115,575
Taylor Bracewell	831
Towells	99,761
Wake Smith	2,853
Whittles	2,191

[1] This includes some £1.1 million in respect of trial costs

Anti-bribery Convention

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is Her Majesty's Government's policy on the OECD's Anti-bribery Convention. [118101]

Mr. Caborn: The Government strongly support the OECD Convention on Combating the Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions. We played a leading role in the negotiations of the Convention and were among the first countries to ratify it. We have played a full part in the peer review process associated with the Convention. The Government are not, however, complacent. The Home Office will publish in May the Government's proposals aimed at modernising the existing legislation, with a view to introducing new legislation as soon as possible thereafter.

Hydropower

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what discussions he has had recently with the Environment Agency over its policy of finding suitable mill sites for the generation of hydropower; [117428]

(2) what role he plays in providing suitable mill sites for the generation of hydropower in co-operation with the Environment Agency. [117630]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* Our new policy to encourage the development of renewable energy, including new hydropower installations, was published as "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21st Century: Conclusions in Response to the Consultation" on 1 February. The Environment Agency was among the bodies consulted in the formulation of our policy.

The Government have adopted a new strategic approach to renewable energy from the regional level downwards. We intend that regional sustainable development frameworks will include regional targets for renewable energy provision, based on assessments covering all relevant renewable technologies. In turn, this will assist regional planning bodies in defining broad locations for renewable energy development and setting criteria for site selection. In dealing with applications for new hydropower installations, the Environment Agency will need to balance potential wider environmental benefits against any local interest.

EC Treaties

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the trade treaties that have been negotiated and signed on behalf of the United Kingdom by the European Community. [117580]

Mr. Caborn: Over three hundred agreements on trade and trade-related matters have been signed by the European Community/European Union since 1972. Most cover matters exclusively within the EU's competence which are applicable to the UK and other member states. Full details are available on the website of the European Council at http://db.consilium.eu.int/accords.

Among the most recent agreements are:

Agreement between the European Community and Australia amending the Agreement on trade in wine (February 2000)

Agreement between the European Coal and Steel Community and the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan on trade in certain steel products (December 1999)

Agreement between the European Community and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on trade in textile products (December 1999)

Exchange of Letters concerning the amendment to the Annexes to the Agreement between the European Community and New Zealand on sanitary measures applicable to trade in live animals and animal products (October 1999)

Agreement on Trade, Development and Co-operation between the European Community and its member states, of the one part, and the Republic of South Africa, on the other part (October 1999)

Protocol adjusting trade aspects of the Europe Agreement establishing an association between the European Communities and their member states, of the one part, and the Republic of Latvia, on the other part, to take account of the accession of the Republic of Austria, the Republic of Finland and the Kingdom of Sweden to the European Union and the outcome of the Uruguay Round negotiations on agriculture, including improvements to the existing preferential arrangements (June 1999).

End of Life Vehicle Directive

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his assessment of the cost implications for the United Kingdom car manufacturing industry of the proposed End of Life Vehicle Directive; and if he will make a statement. [117336]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 715W.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Government support the amendment proposed by the European Parliament to exclude historic cars from the End of Life Vehicle Directive; and if he will make a statement. [117337]

Ms Hewitt: Vehicles will be affected by this Directive only when they become waste as defined under existing legislation—in other words, only when the owners have decided to discard them. For this reason, amendments to the Directive designed to exempt 'historic' vehicles are unnecessary. However, the UK has made it clear that we would have no difficulty with amendments designed to clarify the situation, provided that suitable wording can be found.

Ofgem

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what authority the proposed Ofgem regulator has to consult on and prepare a carbon dioxide reduction plan for the industry. [117771]

Mrs. Liddell: The Gas and Electricity Markets Authority which will be established under the Utilities Bill will have power to do anything calculated to facilitate the performance of its functions under the Electricity and Gas Acts. The Authority's primary focus under the Acts is economic regulation. The Acts will also require the Regulator to take account of guidance on social and environmental matters issued by Government. A draft of such guidance is currently the subject of consultation.

In its Plan and Budget for 2000–01, Ofgem mentioned that it would develop an Environmental Action Plan. This plan will, for example, identify any barriers to fair access for renewable generation and combined heat and power (CHP) to the electricity market as a contribution to meeting government targets for renewable and CHP production.

Non-fossil Fuel Obligation

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much of the non-fossil fuel obligation income for renewable energy support remains unspent in terms of *(a)* income not yet spent or allocated to a non-fossil fuel obligation project and *(b)* income allocated to a non-fossil fuel obligation project but not yet taken up by the project sponsors; and if he will make a statement in respect of unspent and unallocated non-fossil fuel obligation income to support the development of renewable energy. [117706]

Mrs. Liddell: Receipts from the Fossil Fuel Levy can be used only for expenditure on the above market cost of electricity generated under contracts entered into as a consequence of non-fossil fuel obligations (NFFO) and the related administrative costs of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) and their agents. The surplus of receipts over expenditure is currently about £70 million. Expenditure on electricity contracted under the third, fourth and fifth non-fossil fuel obligations (NFFO-3, 4 & 5) for renewables is estimated to be £42 million in financial year 1999–2000. This figure is expected to rise to £60-£80 million next year and peak in 2003–04 as more projects commission and generate. Expenditure is likely to continue until November 2018 when the last contract ends. In the event that Fossil Fuel Levy receipts fail to cover NFFO expenditure generators might not be paid. The surplus is maintained at a level intended to guard against rapid and unexpected falls in electricity prices that would reduce levy receipts and increase NFFO expenditure.

Lawyers

Mr. Iestyn Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117807]

Mr. Byers: The Department employed 105 lawyers as at 31 March 2000.

The number of lawyers who were employed at 31 March in 1995 was 97.

North-east Economy

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to attract more business and industry to the North-east. [117941]

Mr. Caborn: A stable economic climate is vital to stimulate development. DTI policies are aimed to create an environment where new investment is attracted, business can thrive and jobs can be created. To achieve that nationally we have:

Announced a new Enterprise Grant Scheme for SMEs;

Created a £180 million Enterprise Fund to provide both debt and equity finance to UK SMEs with growth potential;

Set up the Small Business Service to provide a strong voice for small business at the heart of Government; and

Created new Regional Venture Capital Funds to support growing businesses in England.

To bring a more specific regional focus, we established eight regional development agencies. They bring together the regional work of DTI, DfEE and DETR on regeneration, rural development, competitiveness and skills and training. They are the lead bodies in the regions for inward investment activity and supply chain work.

In the North-east, the regional development agency, One NorthEast, have published their Regional Economic Strategy. Their vision is that by 2010, the North-east of England will be a vibrant, self-reliant and outward looking region, with the aspiration, ambition and confidence to unlock the potential of all its people. They are working with all of their regional partners to ensure there are sites, premises and the necessary work skills available to ensure the North-east region remains an attractive location for inward investors.

Rover

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the information provided to his Department between 1 November and 29 March by *(a)* BMW and *(b)* Rover. [117555]

Mr. Byers: The release of this information is a matter for BMW and Rover. Information provided by the Group was received "in confidence"—often being of a highly market sensitive nature. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to divulge the details.

I have however lodged in the House of Commons Library documents covering my correspondence and telephone conversations between Professor Milberg (BMW AG) and Professor Samann (Rover Group) from December 1999 to the date of BMW's announcement to sell elements of the Rover Group.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what monitoring was carried out by his Department to ensure that the agreed recovery plan for Rover based on the grant of £152 million was proceeding on schedule. [R] [118067]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The start of the R30 project depended upon approval of the grant offer by the EU Competition authorities.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what was expected to be the change on the profit and loss account at the time of the announcement by BMW of withdrawal from Rover against the profit and loss account position on which he based his decision to provide a £152 million grant; [R] [118065]

(2) what was expected to be the estimated position on the profit and loss account of Rover at the announcement of sale by BMW against the position on which he based his decision to provide a £152 million grant. [R] [118066]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The application for Government RSA support for the R30 project at Longbridge was made in March 1999. Rover's losses in 1998 amounted to £642 million. This was the figure on which the grant decision was based.

BMW's announcement that they were withdrawing from Rover coincided with the announcement of the 1999 results. Rover's losses for 1999 were £750 million.

Assisted Areas Map

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the minimum size of area required for inclusion in a regional aid map. [116594]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 28 March 2000]:* Under the Commission guidelines, areas must have a minimum population of 100,000.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has had a reply from the European Commission about the regional aid map he has sent it. [116593]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 28 March 2000]:* Yes.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what geographical units have been used for selecting the areas on the new regional aid map. [116596]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 28 March 2000]:* Our proposals for the new Assisted Areas map are based on an aggregation of wards.

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the current state of the discussions with the European Commission on the new Assisted Areas Map. [118734]

Mr. Caborn: The Government's proposals for new Assisted Areas were published in the booklet, "The Government's Proposals for New Assisted Areas", on 15 July 1999. A copy of the proposals was placed in the Library. The proposals were submitted to the European Commission for approval as required by Community law.

The European Commission have informed us that the proposals published in July cannot be accepted. They have stated that the proposals, as drafted, would give the United Kingdom an unfair advantage against other member states. The Commission have further stated that if revised proposals are not submitted, they will begin a procedure under Article 88(2) of the EC Treaty. Such a procedure could delay agreement on the new Assisted Areas for up to six months.

In light of this situation and the damage that would be caused by an extended delay in the approval of the new Assisted Areas, the Government intend to submit revised proposals to meet the Commission's concerns. The amendments to the July proposals are being published today in the booklet "Amendments to the Government's Proposals for New Assisted Areas". A copy of the booklet is being distributed to each Member and a copy will be placed in the Library. There will be a three week consultation period on the amendments.

Mobile Phones

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the Consumers Association findings on the radiation risks of hands-free mobile phone connections and shields; and if he will make a statement. [118009]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The findings of the Consumers Association will be assessed by the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones which is expected to report in May. The Department has also passed to the Expert Group independent reports of measurements it had undertaken of shielding devices.

The Department has not undertaken independent testing of hands-free devices. I have accordingly requested that further independent testing of these devices be undertaken. The results of the tests will be published.

Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications have been made to the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme; and how many of these applications were successful. [117875]

Ms Hewitt: Although the final figures for the financial year 1999–2000 are not yet available, the number of new applications for guarantees received by the DTI from approved lenders is estimated at 4,496, of which an estimated 4,291 will have resulted in guaranteed loans. Since the Scheme started in June 1981 over 71,000 loans have been guaranteed. Historic data on the total number of applications received are not available.

The Department records only applications received from approved lenders where the lender is willing to lend. No information is available on the number of business proposals rejected by lenders on commercial grounds.

BNFL

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what objectives he has set for the new senior management of BNFL; if he will make a statement on his plans to monitor its fulfillment of the objectives on each of its operating sites; and if he will make a statement. [117631]

Mrs. Liddell: As shareholder, we have made clear to the new Chairman and Chief Executive that substantial changes are needed in the way in which BNFL manages and runs its business. The Chairman is conducting a fundamental review of management and the Chief Executive is looking at the company with a fresh perspective. Our joint aim is to ensure that the company is able to meet the very real challenges it faces with its customers, the regulators, and others, and can emerge

strengthened and able to play its role as a major global nuclear company. We are determined to build on the relationship that has been developed with the company during the PPP process. We will be considering with them their new Corporate Plan on which they are currently working and will ensure that the performance targets set for the company continue to be rigorous, demanding and regularly monitored.

Motor Industry

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he intends to publish the Competition Commission report on the supply of new motor cars within the United Kingdom. [118704]

Mr. Byers: I have published the report and my response today. I have announced new proposals to bring more competition to the supply of new cars and so help reduce prices.

The Competition Commission found that prices in the UK have been between 10–12 per cent. higher than in similar countries in Europe. This is despite the fact that two-thirds of the cars sold in the UK are imported. They conclude that private car buyers are paying about 10 per cent. too much—or £1,100—for the average car, after taking account of discounts, trade-ins and finance deals.

The Director General of Fair Trading estimates that the annual cost to private car purchasers could be around £1 billion a year as a result of the present system.

In my view the findings of the Competition Commission report cannot be ignored. They represent a clear and unambiguous call for change which requires a positive response.

For many private buyers, a car is the second most expensive purchase of their lives. This report confirms what many people have thought was the case—that in Britain we are paying over the odds for new cars. The reason for this is that the market is not operating as competitively as it should.

I will be introducing measures to bring about greater competition in the supply and selling of new cars which should mean lower prices and increased sales. These measures should restore consumer confidence and bring certainty to the car market.

The Competition Commission has identified a number of ways in which this market fails to function properly. It recommends substantial changes to the distribution of new cars—particularly in the relationship between manufacturers and dealers.

To make the market more competitive, I am taking the immediate steps recommended by the Competition Commission and the Director General of Fair Trading. As the Consumers' Association said in its evidence to the Competition Commission, steps such as insisting dealers are offered the same bulk discounts as fleet customers should make this market function more fairly and put downward pressure on prices.

These immediate remedies will be imposed by Order under the Fair Trading Act 1973. I have published a notice of this order today. By law interested parties must have an opportunity to comment on these proposals. Representations are invited by 19 May 2000, and I intend to make the Order within two months of today.

Among the measures are:

Requiring suppliers to offer dealers who buy cars outright equivalent terms, including volume discounts, to those offered to fleet buyers.

Requiring suppliers to provide their dealers with regular statements of terms they are prepared to offer which reflect the terms given to fleet customers.

Dealers who buy a large quantity of new cars outright will therefore be able to benefit from the sort of volume discounts currently enjoyed by fleet customers and pass on the benefits to customers.

Prohibiting suppliers from discriminating in their dealings with contract hire companies by giving less attractive discounts if the end-user is not a fleet customer.

This will allow contract hire companies to offer a better deal to their private customers and encourage more competitive pricing to private customers generally.

Prohibiting suppliers from imposing contract terms on dealers that prevent or inhibit dealers from advertising prices at which they are willing to sell.

Prohibiting suppliers from refusing to supply on the grounds of the price at which a dealer advertises it is willing to sell.

The current practices can mislead consumers about prices. These measures will ensure that dealers are free to advertise the price at which they are prepared to sell, without fear of penalty from suppliers. The Secretary of State has also not ruled out a ban on recommended retail prices if these two specific remedies need to be reinforced.

Suppliers will be prohibited from imposing conditions or targets on dealers in respect of the number of cars a dealer registers during a certain period, or giving a dealer an advantage which is dependent on the number of cars the dealer registers during a certain period.

Requiring suppliers to publish information on a regular basis concerning the number of cars they have pre-registered.

These should increase transparency and price competition by encouraging suppliers and dealers to set a market clearing price for new cars.

The Competition Commission also makes a number of recommendations for more fundamental change which relate to practices permitted by the European Union's Car Block Exemption rules. I believe these are important changes for the longer term in altering the structure of the market. We are discussing these issues with the European Commission now that the report is published.

Although the Block Exemption formally runs until September 2002, our discussions with the European Commission could bring about changes in the UK before then.

However, owing to the complicated legal and other factors that surround this issue, a point recognised by the Competition Commission, I expect it to take at least a year to resolve.

I will also be pressing the European Commission to enforce the existing Block Exemption rules vigorously to ensure that dealers are free to import new cars from dealers in the manufacturer's franchised network in other EC member states, and that they will not be disadvantaged if they do so and that private buyers are not obstructed if they wish to buy abroad for import into the UK.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Young People

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Government will publish the findings of the joint Women's Unit and Home Office's dialogue with young people. [118770]

Ms Jowell: My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office and I are launching "Listen Up!", our report on the dialogue, which is being published today; copies will be placed in the Library.

The report describes a major consultation exercise with young people run by the National Youth Agency.

This consultation was the first time in which Government consulted young women and young men separately. The report sets out their views and concerns. It looks, in particular, at issues such as the importance of family and parenting; preparation for adult life including school; careers choices; pressures to conform and self-esteem; vulnerability to risks; health, and crime. The report considers the significance of gender differences and looks at ways of involving young people more as policies are developed. It sets out the Government's response to the key concerns raised by young people, giving an outline of those areas where gender specific policies could make a difference.

Grammar Schools

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has given to Ministers of the Crown in respect of their involvement in campaigning for grammar school ballots. [118428]

Ms Estelle Morris: We are keen to encourage all debates on the issues of grammar schools to be conducted fairly. That is why we drew up the Ballot Information Code, which applies specifically to relevant national or local organisations engaged in providing material for parents relating to a petition or a ballot. We commend its principles to all those involved in the debate. A breach of the principles of the Code may lead the Secretary to State to declare a ballot void if, in his opinion, it is likely to have had a significant effect on voting.

Schools (Books and Equipment)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the extra funds for schools for books and equipment will be paid. [118368]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend laid a special grant report before the House on 6 April, under section 88B of the Local Government Act 1988. Once approved, it will empower him to make payments to local authorities on condition that they pass those payments to schools, within a specified time period. It is expected that payments will be made to schools in May. The funds are not specifically for books and equipment, but may be used by schools for any purpose.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how the money for books and equipment announced by the Chancellor in the Budget Statement will be paid to schools that do not maintain a bank account separate from the local education authority. [118369]

Ms Estelle Morris: The funding will be paid to local authorities on condition they make it available for use by such schools. Regulations will be made that will require local education authorities to increase the budgets of all their schools by the amounts of grant indicated in special grant report No. 61. My right hon. Friend is minded to direct all local authorities to make available these sums within seven days of the budget increases required by the regulations. The funds are not specifically for books and equipment, but may be used by schools for any purpose.

Disabled People

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent in the past three years on publicising the Access-to-work scheme; and what assessment he has made of the take-up of opportunities for recruitment and the retention of disabled employees. [118240]

Ms Jowell: Access-to-work is one of a number of programmes and services, provided through the Employment Service, to help disabled people get, or stay in, a job. As such, Access-to-work does not have a separate budget for publicity. During the first 10 months of the last financial year the Employment Service spent £314,000 marketing and promoting the full range of their services for disabled people and their employers. The following table shows how much was spent by the Employment Service, over the previous two financial years:

Year	*Amount (£)*
1997–98	318,000
1998–99	388,012

The Access-to-work programme has been successful in helping an increasing number of disabled people in, or into, employment year on year. Over the current financial year we expect to help more than 23,000 disabled people through Access-to-work at a cost of nearly £26 million. This an increase of 3,000 on last year.

Furthermore, the Employment Service has, through its range of job placing services, helped over 88,500 disabled people find employment during the last financial year. In addition to this, it has helped over 4,500 disabled people retain their employment, by providing advice and support through their Disability Employment Advisers.

Further Education Colleges (Governors)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what information he has collected as to the declared political position of persons appointed as governors of further education colleges since April 1998. [118091]

Mr. Wicks: This information has never been collected for further education.

Learning and Skills Bill

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to what extent he intends that the role of career guidance professionals will be maintained and enhanced as a result of the Learning and Skills Bill [*Lords*]. [117781]

Mr. Wicks: Careers guidance will be a core element of the new ConneXions Service for 13 to 19-year-olds. ConneXions Personal Advisers will give careers advice and guidance as part of the comprehensive support to help raise young people's aspirations and overcome barriers to effective learning. The level and mix of skills required of Personal Advisers in the ConneXions Service represent a new profession. A training programme for Personal Advisers will underpin delivery of the new service and will ensure that Personal Advisers have the necessary skills in areas such as intervention, assessment, brokerage and careers advice and guidance.

Existing careers guidance professionals already have some of the skills required for this new profession and the expectation is that the majority will move to this new role. The DfEE will be consulting shortly on the Professional Framework for Personal Advisers and this will play an important part in developing the profession and the new role of Personal Adviser.

ConneXions Service

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will ensure that the ConneXions Service will be available to all 13 to 19-year-olds and that the level of support available to young people will not be less than that provided by the Careers Service at present. [117780]

Mr. Wicks: ConneXions will provide a major new integrated advice, guidance and support for young people. It will be a universal service which will improve the level of support for all young people aged 13–19.

ConneXions will continue to offer at least the same level of careers information, advice and guidance as is currently provided by the Careers Service.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how he will ensure that the knowledge and experience developed by career guidance practitioners will be used by the ConneXions Service. [117779]

Mr. Wicks: The ConneXions Service will offer at least the same level of careers information, advice and guidance for 13 to 19-year-olds as is currently provided by the Careers Service. But in order to remove the significant barriers to learning that many young people face, careers information, advice and guidance needs to be extended to cover matters relating to social welfare, criminal justice and health, in addition to vocational issues.

The majority of Personal Advisers in the first phase of implementation will be drawn from existing careers and Youth Service practitioners. Over time the ConneXions training programme will ensure that all Personal Advisers are professionally qualified in all relevant aspects of information, advice and guidance to agreed standards for the profession.

A major training programme for Personal Adviser will be developed and the DfEE will shortly be consulting on the professional framework for this new profession.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his announcement on 30 March of an extension of Education Maintenance Allowance to further areas, on what criteria these areas were chosen; and what are the staying-on rates *(a)* in each of these areas and *(b)* as a national average. [117632]

Mr. Wicks: Following promising early evidence from the existing pilots, we have decided to extend the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to a further 40 areas. These have been chosen as being representative and because they have relatively low post-16 participation, low GCSE attainment and high deprivation. The choice of areas also includes some additional rural areas where we will be concentrating on transport costs. For this, four areas have been chosen on the basis of the representative nature of their existing support for transport.

The following table shows the average staying on rates for 16-year-olds from 1995–98, and the national average for the same period:

Region	*New EMA areas*	*Staying on rates of 16 year olds 1995–98*
Merseyside	Liverpool	61.67
	Knowsley	52.45
	Halton	71.87
	Wirral	69.69
	St. Helens	73.98
West Midlands	Sandwell	53.85
	Birmingham	67.73
	Coventry	66.29
	Wolverhampton	63.67
	Worcestershire	0.74
Yorks and Humber	Kingston upon Hull	58.40
	Bradford	61.97
	Sheffield	56.23
	Barnsley	52.09
	Wakefield	66.87
	North East Lincolnshire	62.96
London	Newham	67.42
	Hackney	68.96
	Tower Hamlets	68.96
	Haringey	67.72
	Islington	68.96
	Camden	68.96
	Hammersmith and Fulham	68.96
	Brent	73.08
	Waltham Forest	78.75
	Ealing	70.02
	Barking and Dagenham	66.11
	Wandsworth	68.96

Region	New EMA areas	Staying on rates of 16 year olds 1995–98
North East	Sunderland	53.38
	South Tyneside	53.63
	Hartlepool	63.52
	North Tyneside	67.50
	Northumberland	67.17
North West	Salford	48.95
	Manchester	61.36
	Wigan	58.78
	Tameside	60.78
South East	Luton	69.68
East Midlands	Leicester City	70.97
Eastern	Suffolk	71.02
National average		70.51

Works of Art

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been spent on *(a)* the upkeep and *(b)* the purchase of works of art in his Department for each financial year since 1992. [117467]

Mr. Wills: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 392–93W, which sets out information relating to the Government Art Collection (GAC). Works of art from GAC are displayed in the London head office buildings of the Department for Education and Employment. The Department has also purchased paintings and prints to the value of £28,000 since 1992 (£18,000 in 1996–97 and £10,000 in 1997–98). These are displayed in areas of common use in Caxton House, one of the London head office buildings. No costs have been incurred on their upkeep.

Schools Funding

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what mechanism will be used to deliver the extra funds announced in the Budget to schools; when the schools will receive the money; and what the basis will be for determining the relevant sum for each school. [117514]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* My right hon. Friend laid a special report before the House on 6 April, under section 88B of the Local Government Act 1988. It will empower him to make payments to local authorities on condition that they pass those payments to schools, within a specified time period. It is expected that payments will be made to schools in May. Each school will receive the amount set out in the following table. The pupil numbers to be used will be those recorded for the schools' census on 20 January 2000.

School	Grant £
Primary school with 100 pupils or fewer	3,000
Primary school with more than 100 pupils, but fewer than 201 pupils	6,000
Primary school with 201 pupils or more	9,000
Middle deemed primary school which does not have a year 8 or 9	9,000
Special school	15,000
Secondary school with 600 pupils or fewer	30,000
Secondary school with more than 600 pupils, but less than 1,201 pupils	40,000
Secondary school with 1,201 pupils or more	50,000

For the purposes of calculating grant, all middle schools deemed secondary schools, and all middle schools deemed primary schools which have a year 8 or 9, are to be treated as secondary schools. CTCs are to be funded on the same basis as secondary schools. Nursery schools are to be treated as primary schools. No grant is payable in respect of a school which is to close during the financial year 2000–01.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what requirements secondary schools have to meet to receive the extra funding announced in the Budget, as referred to in the Red Book. [117513]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The additional funding will be part of secondary schools' delegated budgets, so they will be free to decide what to spend it on. It will give extra support to secondary schools in the raising of standards at Key Stage 3 programme, including the setting of challenging school-level targets, and preparation for new Year 7 tests for pupils who have not yet achieved level 4 in English and maths.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the allocation of the extra budget funding for each school in Shrewsbury and Atcham; and if he will make a statement. [118326]

Ms Estelle Morris: The provisional allocation of the extra budget funding for schools in Shropshire is £1.693 million. This is based on January 1999 number pupil data, and will be updated when January 2000 pupil number data become available. The funding to be paid to each school will be based on January 2000 pupil numbers. It is not therefore possible at the moment to list individual school allocations, but I will place in the Library a complete list by constituency when the data enabling me to do so become available.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of *(a)* total funding for schools and *(b)* the additional funding allocated for schools (i) since May 1997 and (ii) in the recent Budget, have been allocated to (A) nursery, (B) primary and (C) secondary schools; what reasons underlie the disparity per head in the distribution of the funding between the three sectors; what plans he has to review that distribution; and if he will make a statement. [118273]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table sets out: *(a)* total standard spending (TSS) for education for 2000–01; *(b)* the increase is TSS since May 1997; and *(c)* the recurrent funding announced in the Budget on 21 March 2000, together with the percentages of these amounts going to under-5s, primary, secondary and other education. The principal reason for the greater historic funding per head for secondary schools is their lower pupil teacher ratios. The table demonstrates that a greater percentage of the additional funding

announced since May 1997 is going into under-5s and primary than the proportions for TSS in 2000–01; that reflects the extra funding the Government have made available to boost standards for pupils in the vital early years of their school career.

	(a) TSS for 2000–01	*(b) Increase in TSS since May 1997*	*(c) Extra funding in Budget*
Total (£ million)	23,003.6	4,495.3	297
Under-5s	7.0%	11.2%	—
Nursery	—	—	0.6%
Primary	42.8%	44.7%	45.3%
Secondary	47.6%	45.4%	47.5%
Other	2.6%	−1.3%	0%

Note:
Column *(c)* does not total 100 per cent., since it does not include funding for special schools, CTCs or pupil referral units.

Foundation Degree Courses

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to allow private companies to offer foundation degree courses; and if he will make a statement. [117347]

Mr. Wicks: In February, the Department issued a consultation paper setting out the Government's proposals on Foundation Degrees. It is our intention that these are degrees and therefore should be awarded only by institutions with degree awarding powers. However, employer involvement in both the design and delivery of Foundation Degree programmes will be critical. In particular, we expect prototype courses to be delivered by consortia which will include employer representation.

Employment Credit (Over-50s)

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact the new employment credit for the over-50s will have in London. [116635]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* New Deal 50 plus will bring new hope to people over 50, including over 200,000 eligible Londoners. It includes a tax free employment credit, which guarantees a minimum take home income of £170 a week or £9,000 a year for those going into full-time work. It is a major new programme of personal advice, jobsearch support, in-work training grant and the employment credit to help people on benefits who are looking for work. The programme has been available nationally from 3 April 2000 after operating in nine selected areas since last October. In only five months over 1,000 people were helped off benefit and back into work.

Academic Freedom

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure academic freedom in *(a)* the conduct and publication of research and *(b)* university teaching. [118012]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* Higher education institutions are independent bodies, whose autonomy is enshrined in legislation. They conduct their own academic programmes, whether teaching or research, as they see fit. Research directly commissioned by this Department is published as a matter of course, either by the Department or by the research institution. Our research contracts place no restrictions on the right of researchers to draw independent and objective conclusions.

School Computers

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of *(a)* primary schools and *(b)* secondary schools have appointed technicians to assist in the running of schools' computer systems; and what estimate he has made of the number of unfilled vacancies within schools. [118235]

Mr. Wills *[holding answers 7 April 2000]:* There are no figures available for the number of primary or secondary schools that have appointed technicians to assist in the running of school computer systems, nor are there figures available for the number of unfilled vacancies. However, the Government are supporting £657 million of investment in schools' ICT provision up to 2002 as part of the National Grid for Learning initiative. This funding is devolved to schools to help enable them to address the priorities identified in their ICT development plan, including securing appropriate technical support.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if all teachers are eligible for assistance with the purchase of a computer; and if he will make a statement. [114998]

Mr. Wills: Any serving, DfEE-registered teacher in current employment in a state maintained school in England or employed by a local education authority in a recognised teaching role who complies with the following conditions is eligible to apply for a subsidy of half the cost of specified computer packages, up to a maximum subsidy of £500, under the scheme. These conditions are:

signed confirmation from the teacher, and his or her headteacher, or local education authority of this employment status;

signed confirmation either that the teacher has been on, is currently attending, or is definitely scheduled to attend a New Opportunities Fund teacher training course or alternatively is a newly qualified teacher who entered initial teacher training on or after September 1998 and is therefore deemed to be competent in ICT in accordance with the ICT Subject Teacher Training National Curriculum;

a signed commitment by the teacher that the computer is for his or her own use.

£20 million has been made available for this scheme. The operation of the scheme is subject to the availability of funding.

Internet (Schools)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact on the timetable for the connection of schools to the Internet of the Competition Commission's review of the proposed acquisition by NTL of Cable and Wireless Communications' cable interests. [116644]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 28 March 2000]:* The Competition Commission has concluded that the merger may be expected not to operate against the public

interest. Choices about schools' connections to the Internet rest with schools themselves in the light of the telecommunications services and funding available to them, and advice from local education authorities and the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency. Good progress is being made in connecting schools to the Internet, with 93 per cent. of schools and 62 per cent. of primary schools connected as at March 1999.

Standard Spending Assessments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list the education Standard Spending Assessments for *(a)* each primary pupil and *(b)* each secondary pupil for each English local education authority for 2000–01; [115849]

(2) when he will reply to the question from the hon. Member for Northavon tabled on 21 March regarding SSAs for education. [118516]

Ms Estelle Morris: I am now able to answer the hon. Member's question. The following table shows the primary and secondary Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupils and the special and specific grant allocations per pupil for each local education authority in England for 2000–01. The special and specific grant totals include the £290 million for schools announced in the Budget on 21 March, and the £50 million announced on 25 November 1999, decisions on the allocation of which my right hon. Friend has now taken.

	SSA per pupil		*Total special and specific grants per pupil*
LEA	*Primary*	*Secondary*	
City of London	3,394	24,041	927
Camden	3,488	4,353	274
Greenwich	3,286	4,237	243
Hackney	3,662	4,918	302
Hammersmith and Fulham	3,465	4,446	250
Islington	3,543	4,653	263
Kensington and Chelsea	3,553	4,364	267
Lambeth	3,678	5,138	299
Lewisham	3,416	4,439	247
Southwark	3,523	4,568	249
Tower Hamlets	3,701	4,799	342
Wandsworth	3,186	4,101	221
Westminster	3,377	4,096	279
Barking and Dagenham	2,803	3,660	128
Barnet	2,664	3,367	117
Bexley	2,535	3,256	96
Brent	3,059	3,980	162
Bromley	2,500	3,179	91
Croydon	2,731	3,559	135
Ealing	2,885	3,786	166
Enfield	2,763	3,511	123
Haringey	3,172	4,160	250
Harrow	2,620	3,412	116
Havering	2,494	3,224	89
Hillingdon	2,626	3,373	112
Hounslow	2,818	3,559	151
Kingston upon Thames	2,501	3,195	109
Merton	2,[illegible]	3,451	129
Newham	3,196	4,110	192
Redbridge	2,675	3,429	125
Richmond upon Thames	2,458	3,119	113
Sutton	2,550	3,199	95
Waltham Forest	2,946	3,785	217
Birmingham	2,623	3,411	192
Coventry	2,474	3,193	149
Dudley	2,258	2,905	126
Sandwell	2,479	3,213	145
Solihull	2,250	2,874	91
Walsall	2,392	3,071	207
Wolverhampton	2,498	3,233	171
Knowsley	2,762	3,651	198
Liverpool	2,726	3,513	194
St. Helens	2,384	3,083	110
Sefton	2,383	3,056	117
Wirral	2,454	3,184	113
Bolton	2,375	3,050	184
Bury	2,300	2,941	106
Manchester	2,799	3,693	240
Oldham	2,441	3,138	218
Rochdale	2,478	3,204	141
Salford	2,488	3,244	189
Stockport	2,247	2,914	113
Tameside	2,365	3,031	121
Trafford	2,310	2,979	107
Wigan	2,283	2,930	108
Barnsley	2,381	3,084	133
Doncaster	2,449	3,182	183
Rotherham	2,364	3,022	180
Sheffield	2,413	3,111	187
Bradford	2,518	3,273	219
Calderdale	2,381	3,072	138
Kirklees	2,404	3,099	157
Leeds	2,383	3,066	181
Wakefield	2,314	2,982	127
Gateshead	2,419	3,124	204
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,546	3,296	144
North Tyneside	2,346	3,047	115
South Tyneside	2,468	3,179	157
Sunderland	2,423	3,128	126
Isles of Scilly	4,268	5,589	781
Bath and North East Somerset	2,238	2,830	117
City of Bristol	2,439	3,169	138
North Somerset	2,254	2,917	112
South Gloucestershire	2,190	2,839	107
Hartlepool	2,445	3,153	119
Middlesbrough	2,569	3,361	209
Redcar and Cleveland	2,437	3,117	106
Stockton-on-Tees	2,391	3,095	145
City of Kingston-upon-Hull	2,534	3,264	134
East Riding of Yorkshire	2,279	2,934	120
North East Lincolnshire	2,429	3,135	122
North Lincolnshire	2,375	3,073	127
North Yorkshire	2,332	2,983	134
York	2,263	2,939	127
Bedfordshire	2,390	3,081	133
Luton	2,607	3,363	178
Buckinghamshire	2,390	3,093	124
Milton Keynes	2,462	3,192	127
Derbyshire	2,266	2,923	122
Derby	2,432	3,136	136
Dorset	2,282	2,926	109
Poole	2,235	2,873	96
Bournemouth	2,361	3,015	102
Durham	2,390	3,095	137
Darlington	2,379	3,078	133
East Sussex	2,445	3,166	122
Brighton and Hove	2,528	3,256	126
Hampshire	2,327	3,014	100
Portsmouth	2,507	3,209	122
Southampton	2,534	3,296	192
Leicestershire	2,202	2,848	109

LEA	SSA per pupil: Primary	SSA per pupil: Secondary	Total special and specific grants per pupil
Leicester	2,577	3,327	160
Rutland	2,264	2,799	163
Staffordshire	2,237	2,884	105
Stoke-on-Trent	2,397	3,104	197
Wiltshire	2,292	2,971	124
Swindon	2,290	2,957	114
Bracknell Forest	2,433	3,159	113
Windsor and Maidenhead	2,452	3,108	128
Newbury	2,320	2,960	123
Reading	2,501	3,271	154
Slough	2,849	3,763	165
Wokingham	2,219	2,874	104
Cambridgeshire	2,313	2,964	114
Peterborough	2,463	3,169	147
Cheshire	2,257	2,898	106
Halton	2,480	3,224	128
Warrington	2,236	2,890	103
Devon	2,345	3,038	122
Plymouth	2,386	3,043	108
Torbay	2,385	3,077	106
Essex	2,441	3,147	107
Southend	2,489	3,201	100
Thurrock	2,597	3,350	132
Herefordshire	2,366	3,062	134
Worcestershire	2,256	2,902	111
Kent	2,443	3,149	117
Rochester and Gillingham	2,417	3,117	107
Lancashire	2,361	3,043	130
Blackburn	2,548	3,277	193
Blackpool	2,404	3,132	119
Nottinghamshire	2,291	2,962	110
Nottingham City	2,626	3,415	249
Shropshire	2,304	2,960	118
The Wrekin	2,389	3,087	154
Cornwall	2,369	3,058	201
Cumbria	2,357	3,032	140
Gloucestershire	2,282	2,935	114
Hertfordshire	2,474	3,170	112
Isle of Wight Council	2,520	3,257	138
Lincolnshire	2,359	3,041	121
Norfolk	2,378	3,051	126
Northamptonshire	2,308	2,974	123
Northumberland	2,332	3,014	126
Oxfordshire	2,397	3,070	130
Somerset	2,310	2,984	131
Suffolk	2,313	2,960	116
Surrey	2,436	3,127	103
Warwickshire	2,267	2,918	124
West Sussex	2,366	3,045	105

Departmental Staff

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what childcare provision was made available in the financial year 1998–99 for use by (i) his departmental staff and (ii) employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department; what was the cost to parents of this childcare; and how many parents used the facilities. [108836]

Mr. Wills: The information is as follows:

(i) *Provision for DfEE Employees*

Workplace Nurseries are available for departmental staff working in Sheffield and Runcorn. The Sheffield nursery has places for 50 children aged six months to school age. The Runcorn nursery has places for 35 children aged three months to school age. Playschemes, operating during the school holidays, are available for DfEE staff working in Sheffield, Runcorn, Darlington and London.

(ii) *Provision for Employees of Executive Agencies*

The workplace nursery and playscheme located in Sheffield are available to Employment Service Head Office employees working in Sheffield.

(iii) *Costs*

In 1998–99 the costs to parents per day were as follows:

Sheffield nursery £12.00
Runcorn nursery £12.60
Sheffield playscheme £6.50
Runcorn playscheme £8.00
Darlington playscheme £6.50
London playscheme £8.40

(iv) *Usage*

In 1998–99 the number of parents using these facilities were as follows:

Sheffield nursery: 81 parents;
Runcorn nursery: 45 parents;
Sheffield playscheme: 37 parents;
Runcorn playscheme: 24 parents;
Darlington playscheme: 48 parents;
London playscheme: 25 parents.

Departmental Functions (Food)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if all food served at his Department's official functions meets the standards of production required of domestic producers. [109781]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* My Department's caterers are required to comply with all legal requirements and relevant regulations governing the procurement and preparation of food and related activities.

Deregulation

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what orders his Department has made under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 in each year since 1994; and what plans it has to introduce such orders. [106088]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 20 January 2000]:* The Department has made two orders under this Act:

The Contracting Out (Administration of the Teachers Superannuation Scheme) Order 1996 (SI 1996/178) enabled the Secretary of State to authorise another person, or that person's employees, to carry out functions regarding the teachers' superannuation scheme and the payment generally of pensions, allowances and gratuities to or in respect of teachers.

The Deregulation (Provision of School Action Plans) Order 1997 (SI 1997/1142) amended sections 17 and 21 of the School Inspections Act 1996 so as to reduce a burden on the appropriate authority for a school to take reasonably practicable steps to secure that every parent of a pupil at the school receives a copy of the authority's statement of action following an inspection of the school under that Act.

We will continue to look for opportunities to use such orders to remove legislation where we can.

Computers (Fraud and Theft)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many cases of computer *(a)* fraud, including fraudulent use of computer chips and *(b)* theft his Department has recorded in the last five years. [106219]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 31 January 2000]:* During the last five years there have been no cases of computer fraud (including fraudulent use of computer chips) in my Department. There have been 49 cases of computer theft since my Department was formed on 5 July 1995.

CABINET OFFICE

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) if she will make it her policy to include a general assessment of the impact on economic activity and competitiveness of the regulations in Regulatory Impact Assessments; [118619]

(2) what assessment has been made of the effectiveness of Regulatory Impact Assessments by Government departments. [118618]

Mr. Stringer: In August 1998, the Government introduced Regulatory Impact Assessment to develop a more open system of assessing the risks, costs, benefits and economic impact of new legislative proposals. Regulatory Impact Assessment is currently being reviewed to identify any further improvements to the effectiveness of the system and guidance.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what monitoring for BSE in cattle the Government proposes to undertake in 2000–01. [118693]

Mr. Nick Brown: In line with advice from SEAC, the Government's Scientific Advisory Committee on BSE, the Government propose to test for BSE in 10,000 cattle aged over five years slaughtered under the Over-Thirty-Months-Scheme. This programme will start in April 2000. It will follow on from last year's similar survey of almost 4,000 cattle. The aim of this second survey will be to monitor the decline in the BSE epidemic in the UK.

This initiative will be additional to the EU-wide testing programme of casualty and fallen stock which was agreed in the Standing Veterinary Committee on 4 April with UK support. It will start in January 2001, and require the UK to examine about 7,000 cattle annually.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of properties in his charge are empty; and what steps are being taken by his Department to reduce the number of such properties. [116919]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The Ministry is currently responsible for 13 empty properties, which represent 5 per cent. of its estate.

The Ministry maintains an active programme to dispose of surplus properties. With the exception of one contaminated site in a rural environment (for which remediation proposals are being prepared) all of the empty properties are in the course of disposal.

Action Plan for Farming

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reason the Action Plan for Farming, published on 30 March, contains no proposals to assist the development of the specialist cheese sector; and if he will make a statement. [117696]

Ms Quin: The Action Plan for Farming is a package of long-term structural measures and short-term financial aid for British farming. It contains proposals aimed at encouraging collaboration and improving marketing performance and competitiveness which may assist the development of the specialist cheese sector.

The Ministry is already supporting the specialist cheese sector through its sponsorship of Food For Britain (FFB) which has day-to-day responsibility for the speciality food industry; its promotion of the EU scheme for protecting food names; and its secondment of an official to the Specialist Cheesemakers Association (SCA), for 12 months, to assist on legislative, regulatory and promotional issues.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reason the Action Plan for Farming, published on 30 March contains no proposals to reduce the impact of the climate change levy on horticulture; and if he will make a statement. [117695]

Ms Quin: Proposals to reduce the impact of the climate change levy on horticulture were announced in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget statement on 21 March. This pre-dated the publication of the Action Plan for Agriculture. The measures announced in the Budget include a discount of fifty per cent. on the levy for a period of up to five years (subject to state aid rules) the allocation of a special package of support from the £50 million energy efficiency fund set up under the levy and the extension of the list of energy investments which qualify for enhanced capital allowances to include thermal screens used in glasshouses.

Some horticultural companies should also be able to take advantage of the measure, announced in the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement last November, to exempt from the levy electricity generated from 'new' forms of renewable energy and in 'good quality' combined heat and power plants.

Payroll Systems

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assistance is available to small growers and farmers for their payroll systems under schemes operated by *(a)* his and *(b)* other Government Departments. [117689]

Ms Quin: MAFF does not offer any assistance to small growers and farmers for their payroll system. However the Department of Trade and Industry conducted a consultation exercise in 1999 on the possible development of a payroll service for small business. As a result it was agreed that the Inland Revenue's New Enterprise Support Initiative (NESI) would be extended to provide on-going, one to one support for payroll assistance. As from 1 April 2000, the expanded NESI includes, free of charge, the following:

a dedicated helpline;

the offer of a visit from locally based Business Support Team;

a detailed "health check" of the employers payroll system;

the offer of further help including one-to-one visits and increased support where new employers are experiencing difficulties with payroll;

cross referral to the full services of the Small Business Service, both nationally and locally.

Regulatory Reform

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which Minister in his Department has responsibility for regulatory reform; and if he will make a statement. [117418]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 4 April 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 4 April 2000, *Official Report,* column 385W.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 189W, on live animal exports, what were the countries of destination of the live sheep exported from the United Kingdom in 1999 for *(a)* slaughter and *(b)* further fattening; and how many were exported to each country of destination. [116647]

Ms Quin: The total number of live sheep exported from the UK during 1999 for slaughter and further fattening are shown in the following table:

Destination country	*Sheep for slaughter*	*Sheep for fattening*
Belgium	—	452
Denmark	757	—
France	—	353,217
Germany	—	44,354
Ireland	420	—
Italy	—	143,183
Netherlands	—	506,899
Portugal	5,647	16,790
Spain	—	54,565
Total	6,824	1,116,202

Our records show that no live sheep were exported to third countries for slaughter or further fattening during 1999.

These figures are derived from the computer system used to issue export health certificates and are subject to updating and amendment.

Fallen Stock

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the number of carcases that were destroyed by *(a)* professional knackermen and *(b)* hunt incinerators in (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99. [117957]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* Records are not collected of the number of animal carcases destroyed by knackermen or hunt kennels and no estimates were made of the numbers destroyed during 1997–98 or 1998–99.

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last issued advice to farmers on methods of disposal of fallen stock. [117960]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* Advice on the disposal of fallen stock was last given to farmers when the Water Code was revised and re-issued in October 1998. A summary of the Water, Air and Soil Codes, which included this advice was circulated with IACS information to 80,000 farmers in February 1999.

Organic Farming

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the United Kingdom's balance of trade with regard to organic produce in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [116298]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* No such figures are available. Organic products are not separately identified in Customs and Excise trade data.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of how many farmers will request support for conversion under the organic farming scheme before April 2001. [118300]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* None. The Organic Farming Scheme is closed to new applications while a review is underway.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many people are employed in the organic farming sector. [118297]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* We estimate the number of registered organic farmers and growers in the UK at the end of January to be 2,500. In addition to primary producers, we estimate that just over 1,000 operators are registered for processing and/or importing organic products.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research he has carried out into improving the efficiency of organic farming in the last three years; and what was the cost of the research. [118299]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 April 2000]*: The three main objectives of the MAFF Organic research programme and the spend on these objectives for the last three years are as follows:

£000

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Constraints on production	801	1,320	1,828
Costs of the conversion period	34	53	49
Environmental impact	73	108	150
Total	908	1,481	[1]2,027

[1] Estimate

NORTHERN IRELAND

Housing Rents

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list for each council area in Northern Ireland the number of dwellings with *(a)* controlled and *(b)* registered rents. [116359]

Mr. George Howarth: As there is no requirement on landlords to register controlled rents, this information does not exist.

The number of registered rents is given in the table.

Council area	Total number of dwellings with registered rents
Antrim	44
Ards	346
Armagh	43
Ballymena	58
Ballymoney	33
Banbridge	34
Belfast	3,499
Carrickfergus	92
Castlereagh	133
Coleraine	77
Cookstown	41
Craigavon	452
Down	55
Dungannon and South Tyrone	69
Fermanagh	46
Larne	133
Limavady	24
Lisburn	244
Derry City	55
Magherafelt	36
Moyle	10
Newry and Mourne	102
Newtownabbey	617
North Down	204
Omagh	35
Strabane	43
Total	6,525

Heritage Lottery Funding

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications for Heritage Lottery funding were made and how many projects approved in each of the last three years; if sufficient funding was available to match applications; and if he will make a statement. [116516]

Mr. George Howarth: Details of applications received and approved in the last three years are as follows:

	Applications received	Applications approved
1997–98	57	26
1998–99	109	59
1999–00	[1]157	60

[1] 34 applications are still live

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) takes a flexible approach to Partnership Funding. Applications made through the Mains Grant or Revenue programmes can receive up to 90 per cent. HLF funding for projects up to £100,000 and 75 per cent. for projects over that amount. Through these programmes in Northern Ireland the Heritage Lottery Fund is not aware of any projects which have received HLF awards failing because of applicants' inability to secure partnership funding.

Student Awards

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many awards were made available, and at what cost, to Northern Ireland students undertaking courses at residential institutions for adult education in Great Britain in each of the last 10 years. [117581]

Mr. Ingram: The number of awards is as follows:

Financial year	Number of awards
1990–91	8
1991–92	8
1992–93	8
1993–94	8
1994–95	12
1995–96	12
1996–97	12
1997–98	12
1998–99	12

The actual expenditure in 1998–99 was £46,104, when only 11 of the awards made available were taken up. Figures beyond this year are not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Education Budget

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what *(a)* amount and *(b)* percentage of money from the education budget was devoted to transport in (i) 1991, (ii) 1995 and (iii) 1999. [117342]

Mr. George Howarth: The information is as follows:

Financial year	Transport costs £ million	Percentage of education budget
1991–92	27.5	2.45
1995–96	38.1	2.84
1996–99	46.2	3.15

Audited figures for 1999–2000 are not yet available.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what *(a)* amount and *(b)* percentage of funding was retained by his Department from the education budget in (i) 1991, (ii) 1995 and (iii) 1999. [117341]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is as follows:

Financial year	*Amount retained (£ million)*	*Percentage retained*
1991–92	15.2	1.36
1995–96	16.3	1.22
1998–99	19.5	1.33

Audited figures for 1999–2000 are not available.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the total amount allocated to the education budget for Northern Ireland in 1991. [117339]

Mr. George Howarth: The total for the 1991–92 financial year was £1,121 million.

Works of Art

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much has been spent on *(a)* the upkeep and *(b)* the purchase of works of art in his Department for each financial year since 1992. [117479]

Mr. Ingram: The Department of Finance and Personnel for Northern Ireland is responsible for the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Art Collection which is independent from the Government Art Collection.

Expenditure on the NICS art collection since 1992 is as follows:

£

	Upkeep	*Purchase of works of art*
1992–93	346	39,000
1993–94	290	30,000
1994–95	285	27,000
1995–96	270	39,000
1996–97	655	31,000
1997–98	215	23,000
1998–99	958	30,000
1999–2000	1,594	59,000

I would also refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 393–94W.

Management Trainee Assessment Centre

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many companies were invited to tender for the development of the 1999 Management Trainee Assessment Centre; to which company the contract was awarded; what use was made of the materials developed by the contractor; what plans he has for future use of those materials; how much was paid to the contractor for work relating to the 1999 Management Trainee Assessment Centre as a percentage of the initial quoted costs; and if he will make a statement. [117316]

Mr. Ingram: The contract for the development of the 1999 Management Trainee Interim Assessment Centre was awarded to the same company as has undertaken the development of the 1998 Assessment Centre—ASE Consultants; no use was made of materials developed by the contractor for the 1999 Management Trainee Assessment Centre; there are no plans to make use of these materials in the future; nothing was paid to the contractor for work relating to the 1999 Management Trainee Assessment Centre.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he last met European Commissioners to discuss EU structural funds allocated to Northern Ireland. [117524]

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State discussed EU Structural Funds issues with Commissioner Neil Kinnock, Vice-President of the European Commission, on 25 November 1999. He was scheduled to meet Michel Barnier, Commissioner for Regional Affairs, when he visited Northern Ireland on 4 February 2000 but was unable to do so because of other pressures. However, I represented the Secretary of State on that occasion.

Liam Averill

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if an extradition warrant has been issued for Liam Averill. [117679]

Mr. Ingram: Six warrants of arrest were issued in respect of Liam Averill by Lisburn Magistrates Court on 12 December 1997. It is the Government's normal policy not to comment on extradition proceedings in individual cases.

Security Industry

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what statutory provisions govern the private security industry in Northern Ireland, including nightclub doormen; and who is responsible for their enforcement. [117350]

Mr. Ingram: In Northern Ireland, any individual or employer who wishes to offer security services for reward must hold a certificate issued under Part V of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996. Responsibility for the enforcement of these statutory provisions rests with the Security Policy and Operations Division of the Northern Ireland Office and the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

There are no statutory provisions covering the regulation of security staff employed to guard premises owned or occupied by their employer although some local authorities require such persons to be registered with them.

Petrol Stations

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many petrol stations in each council area which abut the Irish Republic ceased to

trade in motor vehicle fuel in each of the four years prior to 31 March; and what was the rateable value of those stations in each council area in total. [117676]

Mr. Ingram: Information in the form requested is not readily available from government departments and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

Meningitis Vaccine

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many doses of the new meningococcal vaccines have been discarded because of poor storage or distribution conditions at the hospital in Omagh; and what proportion this is of that total vaccine. [117636]

Mr. George Howarth: None.

Civil Service

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list those Civil Service positions reserved for British citizens. [117256]

Mr. Ingram: Posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service are reserved for UK nationals where the post constitutes "employment in the public service" within the meaning of the Treaty of Rome. The assessment is a functional one dependent on the current duties and responsibilities of the post, and is considered as and when necessary, for example, when a vacancy is to be filled by recruitment. Individual or definitive assessments for every post in the Service do not exist.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from whom he has sought legal advice on the exclusion of Irish citizens from Civil Service posts. [117257]

Mr. Ingram: General entry requirements for the Northern Ireland Civil Service, including nationality requirements, are specified by the Department of Finance and Personnel under the direction and control of Ministers. The Department seeks legal advice on these matters, as and when appropriate, from the Departmental Solicitor's Office.

Border Crossings

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in re-opening border crossing points at Knockaginney Bridge and Annaghroe Bridge. [117258]

Mr. Ingram: No progress has been made to date.

Key Persons Protection Register

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he was first informed of the threats to the life of Belfast solicitor Padraigin Drinan; if he will itemise those threats of which he has been informed; if he will itemise incidents that may reasonably be perceived as designed to intimidate the solicitor; on how many occasions and on what dates *(a)* her home, *(b)* the premises of her legal practice and *(c)* her car has been attacked; what steps the RUC have taken to protect the safety of Ms Drinan; and what steps he will take to ensure Ms Drinan is placed on the Key Persons Protection Register. [117262]

Mr. Ingram: It has been a long-standing convention and practice of successive Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland not to comment on or publicly disclose any matters relating to the personal circumstances and security of specific individuals where those persons are being protected, have been refused such protection or are being considered for protection under the Key Persons Protection Scheme. These matters are by necessity confidential.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many individuals are listed on the Key Persons Protection Register; what is the percentage breakdown of the Register in terms of perceived community origin of key persons; if he will describe the type of risk faced by those on the Register; what are the criteria for a person to be entered on the Register; and what additional protection is available for those persons on the Register [117263]

Mr. Ingram: The Key Persons Protection Scheme exists to provide physical protection measures, at public expense, at the homes and occasionally the workplaces of people in certain jobs and occupations in Northern Ireland whose death or injury from terrorist attack could damage or seriously undermine:

1. the democratic framework of Government;
2. the effective administration of Government and/or the Criminal Justice system; or
3. the maintenance for Law and Order.

The individual must be assessed as being under serious or significant threat.

There are currently 1,260 persons protected by the Scheme.

Records are not maintained on the basis of perceived community origins of persons protected by the Scheme and the information could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Malicious Phone Calls

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken by the RUC in Lurgan to investigate the source of malicious phone calls to business clients of Mrs. Susan Duffy; on what date he was informed that the Northern Ireland Advisory Committee on Telecommunications had traced a malicious call to a registered mobile phone user; how many individuals have been interviewed at this address; and if he will make a statement. [117264]

Mr. Ingram: This matter is currently the subject of an investigation being supervised by the Independent Commission of Police Complaints and it would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment further.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Tagging

13. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which categories of offenders are eligible for release from custodial sentences subject to electronic tagging. [116797]

Mr. Boateng: Prisoners are eligible for early release under the Home Detention Curfew scheme on the basis of the length of their custodial sentence, not the category of their offence. Subject to certain statutory exceptions, prisoners who are sentenced to between three months and four years of imprisonment are eligible for release under the scheme.

Sex offenders required to register under the Sex Offenders Act 1997 are not eligible unless there are exceptional circumstances, and then only with the personal approval of the Director General of the Prison Service.

Asylum Seekers

14. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his target date for reducing the backlog of asylum seekers to the same level as May 1997. [116798]

Mrs. Roche: We have all but cleared the backlog of pre-1993 cases and expect to clear the backlog of 1993–95 cases by the summer of this year. We expect to start making significant inroads into the backlog of post 1996 cases by late spring of this year, and are aiming for a very substantial reduction in the backlog by April 2001.

25. **Ms Ryan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with local authorities outside the south-east about the policy of dispersal of asylum seekers. [116812]

Mr. Straw: We have had many discussions with local authorities about the dispersal of asylum seekers. The National Asylum Support Service began operating last Monday in respect of all new applicants who claimed asylum at their port of entry.

The new asylum support scheme will be extended to cover asylum seekers who claim asylum in-county, while within the county of Kent, on or after Monday 17 April. The effect of this is that no asylum seeker making a claim for asylum in Kent, on or after that date, will be eligible for support from Kent County Council, or Medway Council. This will, I hope, bring considerable relief to the local authorities in Kent. This is the first stage of the roll-out of the support scheme to all in-country applicants.

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to speed up the processing of asylum claims. [116820]

Mrs. Roche: We have already recruited hundreds of new asylum caseworkers in the Integrated Casework Directorate and plan to recruit more; in Croydon, Liverpool and elsewhere. We are also thoroughly overhauling processes across the system from end-to-end and across directorate and departmental boundaries. The provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 will also provide much needed support for the system as a whole.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what amounts each London borough has claimed in excess of the maximum asylum grant available from his Department for *(a)* single asylum seekers and *(b)* asylum seekers with children for (i) 1998–99 and (ii) each calendar month in 1999–2000. [117929]

Mrs. Roche: We do not hold this information on a monthly basis. 1999–2000 was split into two periods, the first from 1 April 1999 to 5 December 1999 and the second from 6 December 1999 to 31 March 2000. The information for the first period on the excess of claim over Special Grant is set out in the table, subject to audit, for both adults and families. Information on the second period is not yet available. A number of claims have been received and are being processed but I am unable to give the information requested at this stage.

Special Grant—1 April to 5 December 1999

£

Local Authority	*Excess of claim over grant* *Adults*	*Families*
Barking and Dagenham	0	260,610
Barnet	0	608,598
Bexley	40,386	41,022
Brent	0	512,376
Bromley	103,135	76,143
Camden	511,217	1,435,467
Corporation of London	163,100	89,400
Croydon	9,712	29,905
Ealing	0	200,890
Enfield	237,803	233,500
Greenwich	0	0
Hackney	0	125,337
Hammersmith and Fulham	25,547	1,759,243
Haringey	635,425	388,022
Harrow	192,534	306,883
Havering	240,803	85,874
Hillingdon	0	434,519
Hounslow	130,456	220,674
Islington	1,454,744	67,643
Kensington and Chelsea	634,482	999,456
Kingston upon Thames	57,280	300,000
Lambeth	0	0
Lewisham	0	0
Merton	66,879	240,813
Newham	0	0
Redbridge	0	20,798
Richmond upon Thames	1,396,033	1,025,550
Southwark	562,254	191,511
Sutton	193,235	15,340
Tower Hamlets	93,169	15,340
Waltham Forest	0	51,461
Wandsworth	117,384	1,517,907
Westminster	919,220	2,092,003

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what criteria asylum seekers are selected for a fast-track system of processing in respect of their claim. [116808]

Mrs. Roche: We are fast-tracking cases which appear to be straightforward or where there are strong public interest grounds for doing so.

Hilda Murrell

15. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report on the case of Hilda Murrell of Shrewsbury from the West Mercia police. [116799]

Mr. Straw: I understand from West Mercia Constabulary that the case, including the remaining forensic evidence, is subject to regular review.

Immigration

16. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures are being taken to reduce the backlog of immigration applications at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [116800]

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in reducing the backlog of outstanding immigration cases. [116801]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The backlog of immigration (that is general and settlement) cases has been reduced from 38,000 in June 1999 to 29,000 at the end of February.

We aim to clear the backlog by July this year. We have streamlined the process for dealing with the intake of after-entry casework. We have introduced revised procedures to speed up the consideration of cases and are allocating around 100 caseworkers to deal exclusively with backlog cases.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures are being taken by the Immigration and Nationality Department to speed up the processing of applications for indefinite leave to remain. [117330]

Mrs. Roche: New applications for indefinite leave to remain are currently being completed within about a week of receipt in straightforward cases that do not require any further inquiry or information. Those cases that cannot be decided upon initial examination will from 10 April be sent directly to dedicated caseworking teams for consideration which should help reduce delays caused by cases awaiting allocation to caseworkers for action. The time taken to complete each case will depend entirely upon its complexity.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria are used in assessing claims for indefinite leave to remain made by foreign nationals. [117331]

Mrs. Roche: All applications for indefinite leave to remain are assessed against either the requirements of the relevant categories of the Immigration Rules or the criteria in any specific concessions outside the Rules, or are considered exceptionally in the light of the particular circumstances of the individual case where the application is made on compassionate grounds.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was *(a)* the average and *(b)* the longest time taken by the Immigration and Nationality Department to process applications for indefinite leave to remain first lodged in (i) January 1996, (ii) January 1997, (iii) January 1998, (iv) January 1999 and (v) January 2000. [117329]

Mrs. Roche: The available information, which relates to applications decided in calendar years 1996 to 1998, is set out in the table. There was a reorganisation of caseworking practices at the beginning of 1999, and an analysis of decisions taken subsequently has not yet been undertaken.

The time taken to process an application for indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom is affected by a number of factors, including the complexity of individual cases. About 70 per cent. of all new applications are currently being decided within two weeks. New applications for indefinite leave to remain that do not require further inquiry or information are currently being completed within about a week. Applications where further inquiries are needed may take considerably longer. However, streamlined procedures have been introduced throughout the Integrated Casework Directorate to speed up the consideration of all applications and these processes are regularly reviewed.

Year of decision	*Average time (in days) to decide applications for indefinite leave to remain*
1996	46
1997	53
1998	72

Convictions

17. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the number of convictions secured in the past three years. [116802]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The latest totals for the number of defendants convicted for indictable offences, summary non-motoring offences and summary motoring offences are:

Year	*Number*
1996	1,441,000
1997	1,386,000
1998	1,470,000

These figures cover all offences, including the numerically large categories of television and vehicle licence evasion.

Asylum Seekers (Iraqi Nationals)

18. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applications have been lodged by Iraqi nationals since 1 May 1997; and how many of those applications have been approved. [116804]

Mrs. Roche: The number of asylum applications lodged by Iraqi nationals since the beginning of May 1997 to the end of December 1999 was 3,870. There were a total of 1,680 decisions made; of which 740 were grants of asylum and 735 were grants of exceptional leave to remain.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

19. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in the use by local authorities of anti-social behaviour orders. [116805]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that about 35 orders are currently in force and a number of local authorities, in consultation with the police, are actively considering applications for further orders. Where orders have been

made they have generally been found to be effective and I would encourage both local authorities and the police to make full use of the orders in appropriate cases.

21. **Ms Buck:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what encouragement he is giving to local partnerships to use the orders made available under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [116807]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have in place a full programme of support to partnerships in using the orders made available under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. In the case of anti-social behaviour orders, for example, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has established an action group under the chairmanship of Lord Warner to identify what additional help needs to be given to the police and local authorities. The group is producing a model protocol for applying for an order and has arranged a series of seminars around the country to spread best practice.

Prisoners (Early Release)

22. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure the greater involvement of victims and their families in the assessment process of prisoners for early release on parole. [116809]

Mr. Boateng: We have announced a comprehensive review of the parole and lifer review processes. The review will consider how victims and their families are currently involved in these processes and whether improvements mights be made.

Victim support and other interest groups will be consulted as part of the review.

CCTV

23. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the impact on crime levels of CCTV in small towns; and if he will make a statement. [116810]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Police operational experience and a number of research studies reveal that Closed Circuit Television has considerable crime reduction and detection success in small towns and elsewhere, particularly when used as part of a wider crime strategy.

Demand under the first round of the £153 million CCTV Initiative demonstrates that crime and disorder partnerships regard CCTV as a valuable asset: we have already invested around £60 million over 320 schemes in England and Wales, including small towns and rural areas.

I announced the second round of the Initiative on 31 March. Around £90 million remains available for allocation, and increased emphasis will be given to proposals from rural areas and community shopping centres where crime and the fear of crime are having a significant adverse effect on local people.

Sentencing (Young Offenders)

24. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the speeding up of sentencing for persistent young offenders. [116811]

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the speeding up of sentencing for persistent young offenders. [116806]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are making continued progress towards achieving our pledge to halve the time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders. Alongside the measures to reduce delay introduced by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, work is being taken forward with local areas to ensure the effective fast tracking of persistent young offenders in both youth and Crown Courts.

Firearms Licences

26. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the obtaining of firearms licences by foreign nationals. [116813]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All applicants for firearm certificates must satisfy the chief officer of police that they have "good reason" to possess the firearms in question and that they are fit to be entrusted to do so without danger to public safety or to the peace. Since 1998, applicants must supply the police with details of two referees to the application. Referees must have known the applicant personally for at least two years. The Association of Chief Police Officers have recently reinforced the need to carry out background checks through Interpol in relation to all foreign applicants and those who have been resident overseas.

Truancy

27. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what help he proposes to give schools and local authorities in combating truancy. [116814]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Truancy is a major contributor to youth offending and can in itself have a devastating impact on a child's prospects for later life. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has allocated extra resources through the Social Inclusion Pupil Support Grant Programme, worth some £500 million over three years, to help reduce levels of unauthorised absence and exclusion.

Secondly, we are introducing, as part of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, an increase in penalty on parents for failing to ensure that a child attends school regularly.

And, thirdly, we are considering actively whether we can encourage the type of scheme which is active in York, for example, where police, education welfare officers, and social services officers, work together as a team, to pick up children who are truant on the streets and bring them back into education.

Police Forces (Non-territorial)

28. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reform the governance of non-territorial police forces. [116815]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid) announced in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 637–38W, our intention to seek to establish, when a suitable legislative opportunity arises, an independent national police authority for the British Transport Police.

Prisons (Health Care)

29. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made on improving the standard of health care in prisons; and if he will make a statement. [116817]

Mr. Boateng: Pilot health needs assessment projects have started in 12 prisons. All prisons and local health authorities have been asked by March 2001 jointly to assess prisoners' health needs and to identify appropriate services to meet them and effective ways of delivery. Implementation of improvements through individual prison health plans is scheduled to begin from April 2001.

Farm and Neighbourhood Watch Schemes

30. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he plans to take to support farm and neighbourhood watch schemes. [116818]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A partnership approach between local communities and the police is the most effective means of tackling crime in rural areas. Neighbourhood and farm watch schemes are excellent examples of this partnership approach in action and we take every opportunity to encourage their establishment. Watch schemes have a valuable role to play in the local crime and disorder reduction partnerships established by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

CS Spray

31. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of indiscriminate use of CS spray have been the subject of police disciplinary proceedings. [116819]

Mr. Charles Clarke: For the period October 1998 to October 1999, 135 complaints of inappropriate use of CS spray were received by the Police Complaints Authority, 10 per cent. of which led to some form of disciplinary action. Two cases resulted in formal disciplinary charges.

Minimum Sentences

33. **Mr. Day:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to bring forward legislation to increase the number of mandatory minimum sentences for persistent offenders. [116821]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government have no plans to bring forward legislation for this purpose.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what agreement has been reached between EU member states in respect of EU-wide minimum prison sentences; in respect of what criminal offences; and if he will make a statement. [118077]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* Article 31(*e*) of the Treaty on European Union, as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam, provides that common action on judicial co-operation in criminal matters shall include

> "progressively adopting measures establishing minimum rules relating to the constituent elements of criminal acts and to penalties in the fields of organised crime, terrorism and illicit drug trafficking".

The conclusions of the Tampere European Council state that

> "efforts to agree on common definitions, incriminations and sanctions should be focused in the first instance on a limited number of sectors of particular relevance, such as financial crime (money laundering, corruption, euro counterfeiting), drugs trafficking, trafficking in human beings, particularly exploitation of women, sexual exploitation of children, high tech crime and environmental crime" (paragraph 48).

The Government support the priorities established at Tampere, and consider that steps taken to implement action in furtherance of these priorities can make a significant contribution to combating cross-border and organised crime.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which criminal offences in England and Wales are punishable by the imposition of a minimum determinate prison sentence for the first or second offence, indicating the minimum in each case. [118074]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* There are no criminal offences that attract an automatic minimum determinate prison sentence for either a first or second offence by a given offender.

Section 2 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 provides for those who are convicted of a second serious sexual or violent offence to be sentenced to life imprisonment (an indeterminate sentence).

Information Commissioner

34. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for the role of the Information Commissioner. [116822]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The functions of the Information Commissioner are set out in the Freedom of Information Bill which is currently before Parliament. The Information Commissioner will have extensive powers to monitor and encourage good practice and to enforce compliance with the requirements of the Bill.

Security Industry

35. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on regulation of the private security industry. [116823]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Our White Paper, "The Government's Proposals for Regulation of the Private Security Industry in England and Wales", published last year, sets out plans to introduce statutory regulation of the industry. The proposals include plans to establish a Private Security Industry Authority to be responsible for maintaining and improving standards within the industry, and for licensing people employed in the industry. We intend to introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time permits.

West Mercia Police

36. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the funding of West Mercia police. [116824]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The West Mercia Police Authority have set a net budget of £125.7 million for 2000–01. This represents an increase of 7.9 per cent. on the budget for 1999–2000.

Police Numbers (London)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers the Metropolitan Police will have by the end of 2000–01; and what the figure was in 1997. [116789]

Mr. Straw: In March 1997, the Metropolitan Police Service had a strength of 27,166. In March of this year, estimated strength was 26,034. From 1 April, 474 Metropolitan Police officers are being seconded to county constabularies as a result of the boundary changes to the Metropolitan Police District, bringing total numbers to 25,556. The Commissioner intends to maintain overall numbers at around this level for the current financial year.

In addition, administrative changes made by the new Commissioner should have the effect of putting an extra 300 officers on the streets by the end of the financial year.

Organised Crime

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the amount of organised crime in the UK that is organised by foreign nationals living in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [117823]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The threat posed to the United Kingdom by organised crime is assessed each year by the National Crime Intelligence Service (NCIS). NCIS's threat assessment for 1999 showed that while there was evidence of the involvement of foreign nationals, the major part of organised crime activity was carried out by British criminals based in the United Kingdom.

Freedom of Information Bill

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will consult interested parties about the contents of the publication scheme that his Department will be required to adopt under the Freedom of Information Bill. [117969]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The publication scheme which every public authority will be required to adopt and maintain under the provisions of clause 17 of the Freedom of Information Bill is an important part of the drive to greater openness across the whole of the public sector.

The Home Office publication scheme will be agreed with the Information Commissioner and will be developed in accordance with any advice and guidance which the Commissioner may issue.

Welsh Police Forces

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police officers were in service in the Welsh police forces in *(a)* 1990 and *(b)* 1995;

[118379]

(2) how many police officers are serving in police forces in Wales. [118399]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is given in the table:

Year	*Number of police officers*
1990	6,390
1995	6,289
1999	6,692

The figures given are strength for ordinary duty (full-time equivalent) as at 30 September.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many licences were granted for LD50 tests in each of the last four years. [117851]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since 1995, 14 licences have been issued authorising the LD50 (Organisation for European Co-Operation and Development Guideline 401) test as shown:

1995: 3
1996: 3
1997: 3
1998: 4
1999: 1

In my reply of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 437W, I reported that 12 of these licences have now been varied to remove authority for the LD50 (Guideline 401) test and that the remaining two licences were the subject of representations from the licence holders under section 12 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. I understand that the holders of these two licences have now agreed to withdraw their representations and to submit their licences for removal of authority for the LD50 test. This action will be completed shortly.

No licences authorising the test have been issued this year and we will no longer grant new licences for the test.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Metropolitan Police will appoint coroners' officers to the Southern District of Greater London to bring it up to full strength. [118243]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the current compliment of nine coroners officers in the Southern District of Greater London is one below full strength. The single vacancy will be filled on 2 May 2000.

Criminal Records

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the results of his Department's impact assessment survey into the creation of the Criminal Records Bureau and the imposition of the enhanced criminal records certificate; and if he will make a statement. [118526]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There has been widespread support for the establishment of the Criminal Records Bureau, and for the kind of information that it will make available to employers and organisations, often for the first time. Before we make Regulations later in the year to prescribe various matters including charges for certificates, we shall undertake a regulatory impact exercise to provide an up-to-date assessment of the implications. Interested sectors will be consulted, and the results will be made known.

Family Court Welfare Service

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* document titles and *(b)* page references of Family Court Welfare Officer training material on Children Act contact and residence disputes which provide guidance on (i) how much time should be apportioned between parents after divorce and separation and (ii) how long it should take for this level of contact to be attained. [117804]

Mr. Boateng: There is no guidance which specifies the level or nature of contact to be recommended in a specific set of circumstances.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what records have been kept by the Family Court Welfare Service for each of the last three years showing the levels of contact recommended between non-resident parents and their children in disputed access cases. [117803]

Mr. Boateng: No such records are kept and there is no requirement for probation services to do so.

Official Secrets Act

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been *(a)* charged and *(b)* convicted of offences for breaches of the Official Secrets Act in each of the last five years. [117259]

Mr. Boateng: Data on the numbers of persons charged are not collected centrally.

The available information comes from the Home Office court proceedings database which only identifies those defendants who were prosecuted under the Act for triable either-way offences. Between 1994 and 1998 inclusive it shows that there were three such prosecutions. In 1997, one person was prosecuted, convicted and given a custodial sentence. In 1998, two people were prosecuted of which one was convicted and given a custodial sentence.

Criminal Trials (Exhibits)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what requirement there is for police authorities to retain exhibits used in criminal trials, once the trial is completed, for the purpose of any future appeal; and what requirement there is for the *(a)* victims of the crime concerned and *(b)* relatives of victims to be consulted concerning the retention and disposal of such exhibits where they were the property of the victim. [118560]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the Criminal Appeals Rules 1968, the arrangements for the retention of exhibits in criminal proceedings pending appeal, are matters for the court to determine. The rules provide that exhibits must be retained for 35 days from the date of conviction or, if an appeal is lodged, until the determination of the appeal. The exhibits may be retained in the custody of the court, the person who produced the exhibit at the trial (prosecution or defence) or any other person and such arrangements can include provision for the inspection of the exhibit by any interested party.

Section 22 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) provides that where property has been seized or taken away by the police it may be retained so long as is necessary in all the circumstances. The section goes on to clarify that such property may be retained only while in use as evidence, for forensic examination, for investigation in connection with an offence, or in order to establish the lawful owner, and must not be retained if a photograph or copy would suffice for these purposes.
Policy on the return of property to the lawful owner is a matter for the police force concerned but I understand that every force has a clear policy regarding the disposal of property and is fully aware of the provision of section 22 of PACE. Moreover, guidance was issued to the police in 1997 on the disposal of property under the Police (Property) Regulations 1997, where the owner cannot be established and no competent court order has been made in respect of it.

Police Constables

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what *(a)* nationality and *(b)* residency requirements there are for appointment as a police constable in England and Wales; which police forces in England and Wales undertake which part of the recruitment process outside the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [118543]

Mr. Straw: Home Office Circulars 99/1982 and 33/1987, issued to police forces on 3 November 1982 and 15 June 1997 respectively, provide guidance on the nationality qualifications for applicants to the police service. To be eligible for appointment as a constable a candidate must be:

(a) a British citizen; or

(b) a Commonwealth citizen (other than a British citizen) or a citizen of the Irish Republic, in which case he or she must satisfy one of the following conditions:

(i) at least one of his or her parents must be, or have been at death, a Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Irish Republic; or

(ii) he or she must have resided in a country or territory within the Commonwealth or in the Irish Republic, or have been employed elsewhere in the service of the Crown, or partly have so resided and partly been so employed, for at least five years out of the last eight years preceding the date of his or her appointment.

If not qualified under (i) or (ii) above, he/she must satisfy the chief officer of police that he/she is so closely connected with a country or territory within the Commonwealth either by ancestry, upbringing or residence, or by reason of national service, that an exception may properly be made in his/her favour.

There is no statutory requirement for an applicant for appointment as a police officer to have resided in the force area prior to application which is a matter to be

determined on a local basis by chief police officers. No record is held centrally of which forces have a residency requirement as part of their recruitment process.

Cabinet Office guidance, on which police forces base their policy for carrying out security clearances of applicants, recommends that the normal residency requirement for security clearance is that the applicant has been resident in the United Kingdom for the previous three years. However, if the applicant has spent the previous three years in another country, discretion may be given to undertake overseas security checks where this is possible.

We do not hold any information centrally on which police forces undertake parts of the recruitment process outside the United Kingdom. This could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Representation of the People Act

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the oral statement by the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), on 13 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 487–89, what evidence of adequate public consultation was provided by each local authority submitting proposals for a pilot scheme under section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000; which schemes were *(a)* withdrawn and *(b)* not approved because of a lack of adequate public consultation; and if he will make a statement. [118562]

Mr. Straw: Local authorities which made applications under section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 were required to give an assurance that no voter would be put at a disadvantage by their pilot schemes but they were not required to submit specific evidence of any public consultation which they may have undertaken before submitting their applications. Birmingham, Halton, Pendle, Telford and Wrekin and Warrington later withdrew their applications but we were not advised of the reason for withdrawal in every case. Applications from Milton Keynes, Solihull, Thurrock and Wirral were not approved because of local opposition to the proposed schemes.

Hard Drugs

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in tackling the illegal trade in hard drugs. [116803]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Stifling the availability of illegal drugs is one of the four key aims of the Government's drugs strategy.

The United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator has set challenging targets to reduce access to heroin and cocaine among young people by 25 per cent. by 2005 and by 50 per cent. by 2008. He will be reporting on progress in his second Annual Report in the near future.

Tackling the supply of illicit drugs, particularly heroin and cocaine, is a top priority for the police and Customs. In 1999, the National Crime Squad seized drugs with a street value of £77 million, a two-and-a-half fold increase on 1998.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Burma

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts concerning the implementation of investment sanctions against Burma. [118362]

Mr. Battle: We regularly review the adequacy of EU measures on Burma. We have today persuaded EU Partners to strengthen the EU Common Position on Burma with three new measures: adding a ban on export of equipment that might be used for internal repression or terrorism; naming and shaming those Burmese leaders banned from visiting the EU; and freezing their assets.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to introduce legislation to allow the imposition of unilateral investment sanctions on Burma. [118364]

Mr. Battle: We believe that multilateral sanctions are more effective than unilateral ones and have no plans to introduce legislation allowing adoption of unilateral investment sanctions on Burma. Our policy is not to encourage trade or investment in Burma.

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had recently with UK business about investment in Burma; and if he will make a statement. [118656]

Mr. Battle: We have made clear to Premier Oil that we do not encourage trade with or investment in Burma. On 27 March, I met Charles Jamieson, Chief Executive of Premier Oil, and made clear to him our deep concern about their investment in Burma and that we would welcome their moving out as soon as and to the fullest extent that they lawfully can. We regularly give business inquirers a statement on the nature of the Burmese regime and the state of the economy.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of properties in his charge are empty; and what steps are being taken by his Department to reduce the number of such properties. [116918]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* There are 527 office buildings and Residences for Heads of Post overseas. Of these, eight are currently empty. This represents 1.5 per cent. of the total.

The administration of staff residential properties on the overseas estate has been devolved to individual Posts. Details of any empty properties at all 222 Posts could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

FCO policy is that no property should be left vacant unless this is unavoidable in the short-term or there are reasons for its retention, such as a break in diplomatic relations. Properties that are surplus to requirements are disposed of as soon as market conditions allow.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117812]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office employs its own lawyers (Legal Advisers).

On 31 March 1995 the number of Legal Advisers employed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was 29. Of these 29, one was on a career-break and one was on loan to the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers.

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European Union

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what report he has received from the official UK participants in the Friends of Europe Conference of 9 March in Brussels; and what contribution was made by the UK participants. [118021]

Mr. Vaz: The British Ambassador to Belgium, Mr. David Colvin, attended part of the Friends of Europe Conference on 9 March as an observer. He did not address the Conference and no report was made.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of his speech of 27 March, in Portsmouth, on the role of Governments in promoting Europe. [118024]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did not attend the Council of Europe Parliamentary and Public Relations Committee visit to Portsmouth from 25–28 March.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many responses he has received to the Your Britain, Your Europe questionnaire; what proportion this represents of those distributed; and what the results are. [118022]

Mr. Vaz: We received only a small number of replies to the short questionnaire attached to the "Your Britain, Your Europe" leaflet that accompanied my roadshow. The formal responses represented a small percentage of the seven thousand leaflets distributed, though many more people expressed their support at the time. We therefore decided not to draw any conclusions from such a small sample of written replies.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the purpose of the publication, "Six Years of Change: How Funding From the European Union has Helped the North West 1994–99"; what was the cost of producing it; how many copies were distributed; what contribution was made to it by his Department; and if he will make a statement on his policy on the political neutrality in respect of information about the costs and benefits of EU membership in such publications. [118028]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office did not make a financial contribution to this publication. For further details I refer the hon. Member to the Director of the Government Office for the North-west.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the *(a)* nature and *(b)* cost of official representation at the Britain in Europe event in Brussels, on 22 March. [118026]

Mr. Vaz: Some officials from the UK's Permanent Representation to the European Union attend the reception on the evening of 22 March. This entailed no official cost.

Human Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if it is his policy to determine which former *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* senior armed forces personnel and *(c)* heads of state have records of human rights abuse; what relevant files have been communicated to (i) the Home Office and (ii) legal departments; and if he will make a statement. [118018]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office passes specific allegations of criminal offences by foreign nationals that fall within the jurisdiction of the UK courts to the relevant UK authorities. Specific allegations of crimes which may fall within the jurisdiction of International Criminal Tribunals are also passed to the Tribunal concerned.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the EU intends to submit its planned Charter of Fundamental Rights to the European Court of Human Rights to ensure its compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights. [118271]

Mr. Vaz: The Cologne Conclusions state that the Charter

> should contain the fundamental rights and freedoms as well as the procedural rights

guaranteed by the ECHR. To ensure compatibility between the Charter and the ECHR the drafting Convention has invited Council of Europe observers actively to participate in all its meetings. I am not aware of any current plans to submit the Charter to the European Court of Human Rights.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the proposed EU Charter of Fundamental Rights will be incorporated into the Treaties. [118270]

Mr. Vaz: The Council has not yet considered this issue. The Cologne Conclusions state that the question of

> whether and if so how the Charter should be integrated into the Treaties

will only be considered once the drafting body has presented its draft before the Nice European Council in December 2000.

EU Veto and Commissioners

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) in which areas the British Government intend to retain their veto in EU negotiations; [118107]

(2) what the Government's policy is in respect of reducing the number of Commissioners from the larger EU member states. [118106]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The Government's position on both these issues is clearly set out in the White Paper laid before this House on 15 February.

European Parliament

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the Government's policy in respect of proportional representation for the European Parliament on a Europe-wide list system. [118105]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The Government see little merit in a Europe-wide list system for the European Parliament. Nor is it an idea which has so far attracted any serious support from other member states in the Intergovernmental Conference.

European Court of Justice

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is in respect of strengthened powers for the European Court of Justice. [118104]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The Government are in favour of a strong and effective European Court of Justice. We support reforms that will allow the Court to cope more quickly and efficiently with a workload that will be increased further with enlargement.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on UK policy towards Sierra Leone. [118769]

Mr. Hain: We are committed to helping the Government and people of Sierra Leone and people of Sierra Leone restore sustainable peace and security after a brutal civil war. We are also encouraging wider support for Sierra Leone from the international community.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development jointly chaired with representatives of the UN and the World bank at a high level conference on Sierra Leone at Lancaster House on 27 March. This resulted in pledges of new assistance totalling more than £40,5 million, including a further £17.5 million from DFID. Donors reaffirmed political support for the peace process, and agreed to speed up implementation of their programmes in Sierra Leone.

We have agreed with the Government of Sierra Leone that a number of the weapons and ammunition which we provided last year for the new Sierra Leone Army can be used temporarily by the new police force. This will help meet an urgent requirement for armed police to deploy in support of the UN peacekeeping force, and help promote peace and security.

We have also decided also to establish a UK-led Military Advisory and Training Team (MATT) of up to 90 personnel. This will provide advice and training to help the Government of Sierra Leone to build new, democratically accountable and effective armed forces, with a strengthened civilian Ministry of Defence. The UK contribution to the MATT will be funded by the FCO, MOD and DFID. The UK will provide the majority of the personnel, but other countries with an interest in building peace in Sierra Leone will also contribute. Work will begin as soon as possible.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 11 April 2000

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Report

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Solicitor-General when he expects the Law Officers' Department's departmental report to be published. [118810]

The Solicitor-General: I can confirm that copies of the departmental report have been placed in the Libraries of the House today.

John Howes

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Solicitor-General for what reason Mr. John Howes of the Treasury Solicitor's staff visited the Law Society building on 2 December 1999; and with whom he had contact. [118288]

The Solicitor-General: On 2 December 1999, Mr. John Howes, a member of the Treasury Solicitor's staff, visited the Law Society's headquarters in Chancery Lane for the purpose of having lunch with an administrator in a client department, the Office of Fair Trading, on whose behalf he had conduct of a case. He had attended the High Court for an interlocutory hearing in that case with the administrator in the morning. In the afternoon he was to attend a meeting in the offices of the Office of Fair Trading in Chancery House, Chancery Lane. Mr. Howes had no other purpose in visiting the Law Society on that date.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sri Lanka

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what annual contribution Britain has made to aid for Sri Lanka since 1964. [117674]

Clare Short: Bilateral expenditure from the UK is given in the table. The UK also assists Sri Lanka through its contributions to multilateral organisations such as the World bank and the EC.

Bilateral gross public expenditure on aid to Sri Lanka

Year	*£000*
1964	741
1965	287
1966	2,764
1967	4,492
1968	4,030
1969	4,543
1970	4,543
1971	5,974
1972	3,677
1973	2,092
1974	1,559
1975	2,711
1976	5,455
1977	3,989
1978	8,318
1979	12,242
1980	31,492
1981	26,272
1982	33,287
1983	29,461
1984	26,203
1985	17,316
1986	15,981
1987[1]	18,690
1987–88[1]	23,181
1988–89	25,465
1989–90	17,362
1990–91	18,646
1991–92	12,450
1992–93	16,616
1993–94	12,875
1994–95	11,856
1995–96	15,181
1996–97	19,937
1997–98	11,553
1998–99	7,831

[1] Aid statistics have been presented on a financial year basis since 1992. In order to give complete coverage, figures for both calendar year 1987 and financial year 1987–88 have been included. The series cannot therefore be summed as this will involve double counting data for the final three quarters of 1997.

Source:

British Aid Statistics and Statistics on International Development

Works of Art

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much has been spent on *(a)* the upkeep and *(b)* the purchase of works of art in her Department for each financial year since 1992. [117468]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development (DFID) has not purchased any works of art. The 13 works of art on display in DFID are on loan from the Government Art Collection, who are responsible for the upkeep of the items.

In 1993–94 the Overseas Development Administration purchased two Howard Hodgkin limited edition lithographs at a total cost of £22,938, including framing and dealer's commission. These prints were purchased with the intention of presenting them to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to mark the opening of the new bank building in London. It was, however, subsequently agreed that these lithographs should be loaned to the Government Art Collection and they are at present on display in the DFID London office.

Burma

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with her international colleagues concerning humanitarian aid to Burma via non-governmental organisations. [117608]

Clare Short: My Department is working to promote a more coherent and consistent approach by the international community. This issue is a central element of this Government's discussions with their international partners about policy towards Burma.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made concerning the transmission of hydroelectric power produced in Karenni state to Rangoon. [117290]

Clare Short: My Department has made no representations on the issue of transmission of hydroelectric power in Burma.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent negotiations her Department has had with the State Peace and Development Council in Burma concerning the operations of non-governmental organisations in *(a)* Karenni state and *(b)* Shan state. [117289]

Clare Short: My Department has no dealings with the State Peace and Development Council. But the Government have urged that non-governmental organisations should be allowed unrestricted access within Burma.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the extent to which humanitarian aid has reached the minority tribes of Burma. [117287]

Clare Short: United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations report regularly on their activities. Projects implemented at community or village level, avoiding Burmese official channels, generally benefit the poor and disadvantaged, as is intended.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent humanitarian assistance her Department has given via non-governmental bodies in Burma. [117286]

Clare Short: The challenge for the international development community is to help poor people in Burma without helping the government that is largely responsible for keeping them poor. We are attempting to work with others to improve the livelihoods of poor and socially excluded people inside, and who have fled from, Burma; provide support to and build the capacity of civil society; reduce human rights abuses; and contribute to tackling serious threats to public health to poor people inside and adjacent to Burma. We shall publish a Country Strategy Paper shortly.

Four projects are currently being implemented by NGOs financed from the Civil Society Challenge Fund, or the Joint Funding Scheme which it replaced:

Population Services International

Condom Social Marketing to improve reproductive health £498,197.

To increase the availability of condoms. To increase the acceptability of condoms. To increased local capacity to prevent AIDS/HIV/STDs.

World Vision

Street and Working Children £451,224

To improve the status and quality of life among children.

World Vision

Community based disability, prevention and rehabilitation £94,045

To improve the well being, status and opportunities of disabled people within their own communities and at the national level.

Health Unlimited

A basic health care programme, Kachin State £250,000

Establish a basic primary health care service that covers 100,000 people in that part of Burma controlled by the Kachin Independence Organisation.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many lawyers are employed by her Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117809]

Clare Short: My Department does not employ any lawyers to act on behalf of the Department. We buy in legal services from the Scottish Executive and Treasury Solicitors to meet our requirements.

In the implementation of its overseas development assistance programme, DFID employs contract staff to provide legal advisory and executive functions to overseas governments. DFID currently employs eight lawyers on this basis as compared with 21 in 1995.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Utilities Bill

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 10 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 839W, on the Utilities Bill, if the officials of his Department who met the Other Licensed Operators group on 15 February to discuss the Utilities Bill included secondees to his Department from commercial companies. [115770]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* A secondee from the law firm Simmons and Simmons was present at the OLO group meeting on 15 February. All secondees are covered by arrangements to avoid conflicts of interest.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the complete sites for car manufacturing at *(a)* Longbridge, *(b)* Dagenham and *(c)* Cowley are covered by the EU Objective 2 map. [118085]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* Most of the Longbridge site and all of the Dagenham site are included in the new Objective 2 European Structural Fund map. The Cowley site is not included in the map.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason Worcestershire has not been given Objective 2 status. [118699]

Mr. Caborn: Worcestershire did not meet the criteria set out in "The UK Government's proposals for new Objective 2 funding" (URN99/1021). Consequently only a few wards in the county have been included in the Objective 2 map. Those wards were included to make up contiguous areas of sufficient size, as required by the European Commission.

Nissan Renault

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with Nissan Renault about the location of the production line of the new Micra; and when he expects a decision on its location to be made. [117876]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are working closely with the company over their future investment plans for its Sunderland plant. We are committed to working with the company to build on its current position as the most productive plant in Europe and encourage its further development. Decisions on the timing and location of investment in new models are a commercial matter for the company.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Schools (Shropshire)

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by parliamentary constituency *(a)* the primary schools and *(b)* the secondary schools in Shropshire which (i) closed and (ii) opened in the periods (A) 1979 to 1997 and (B) since May 1997. [118527]

Ms Estelle Morris: Since 1983, the earliest year for which we have information available, the primary and secondary schools which have closed and opened in Shropshire (excluding special schools) are as listed. Some schools have closed to reopen as an amalgamated school; some have closed to facilitate a change in age range. It is not possible, from the data available, to provide this information by parliamentary constituencies.

Shropshire—primary and secondary schools opened and closed since 1983

Date of closure	*School*	*Successor schools*
31 August 1983	Nant Mawr Primary	—
31 August 1983	Monkhopton CE Aided Primary	—
31 August 1984	Richards Castle Count Primary	—
31 August 1984	Morton CE Controlled Primary	Pant Bryn Offa
31 August 1984	Porthywaen CE Controlled Primary	
31 August 1984	Llanymynech CE Controlled Primary	
31 August 1984	Marton CE Controlled Primary	—
31 August 1985	Hook-a-Gate CE Primary	—
31 August 1985	Chapel Lawn CE Controlled Primary	—
31 July 1987	Apley Park Secondary	—
31 December 1987	Teagues Bridge Junior School	Teagues Bridge Primary School
31 December 1987	Teagues Bridge Infant School	
31 August 1988	Coton Mount Infant School	Greenfields
31 August 1988	Lancasterian County Primary School	Martin Wilson
31 August 1988	St. Michael's Street County Primary School	
31 August 1988	Acton Burnell Primary School	—
31 August 1988	Ightfield C of E School	—
31 August 1988	Fitzalan School	The Marches
31 August 1988	Croeswylan-Oswestry School	
31 August 1989	Lyneal C of E (Controlled) Primary School	
31 August 1989	Stirchley Country Middle School	Stirchley County Primary School
31 August 1989	Brookside Middle School	Brookside County Primary School
31 August 1989	Hollinswood County Middle School	Hollinswood Junior School
31 August 1989	Hollinswood First	Hollinswood Infant School
31 August 1989	Brindleyford First	Brindleyford Primary School
31 August 1989	Holmer Lake First	Holmer Lake Primary School
31 August 1989	Randlay First	Randley Primary School
31 August 1989	Stirchley First	Stirchley Primary School
31 August 1991	Bayston Hill County Infant School	Bayston Hill Longmeadows Primary
31 August 1991	Bayston Hill C of E Junior School	
31 August 1991	Hopesay Parochial Primary School	—
31 August 1991	St. Laurence's C of E Infant School	St. Laurence's CE (VC) Primary
31 August 1991	Stockton Norton C of E Primary School	—
31 August 1992	Ellerdine County Primary School	—
31 August 1992	Rodington C of E Primary School	—
31 August 1992	St. Peter's C of E Primary School (Wrockwardine)	St. Peter's CE P Bratton
31 August 1993	Coreley C of E Primary School	—
31 August 1994	The Down Primary School	Brown Clee
31 August 1994	Ditton Priors C of E Primary School	
31 August 1994	Burwarton C of E Primary School	
31 August 1994	Berrington C of E Primary School	—
31 August 1994	The John Hunt School	The Sutherland
31 August 1994	The Manor School	
1 September 1996	Ford C of E Primary School	Trinity
1 September 1996	Wattlesborough C of E Primary School	
1 September 1996	Yockleton C of E Primary School	

New schools opened

Implementation date	*School name*
1 September 1988	New Secondary School—following amalgamation of Croeswylan and Fitzalan Secondary Schools
1 January 1989	Radbrook County Primary
1 September 1990	New Primary School—following amalgamation of Ludlow St. Laurence Infant and Junior Schools
1 September 1991	Establish new VC primary school
1 September 1992	Establish new St. Peter's Bratton VC Primary School
29 July 1994	New primary school—following amalgamation of Yockleton and Wattleborough CE Primary School
27 April 1998	Redhill Primary School

Standards Fund

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the proportion of the Standards Fund available for the year ending 31 March that will be claimed; and what assessment he has made of the reasons for under-claiming. [118236]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The full Standards Fund claim by local education authorities for the year ending 31 March 2000 will not be known until later in the year. Authorities' final claims follow from audited, closed accounts for 1999–2000.

Internet Services (Concessionary Pricing)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his Department's policy is on concessionary pricing for access for older people to computer training and internet services. [118396]

Mr. Wicks: The Department for Education and Employment is committed to learning later in life and to widening access to ICT skills and the internet. We have provided £252 million through the Capital Modernisation Fund (CMF) to set up Information, Communications Technologies (ICT) Learning Centres which will provide access to ICT including learning materials, the internet and e-mail. One of the key client groups for this initiative is older people and we currently have an early pilot project with Age Concern, Waltham Forest, London, which provides free ICT access and training to people over 50. The project also provides outreach for those who are housebound or in residential care homes.

In addition, the Government are also about to launch the ICT for Employability Initiative which commits £25 million to providing 50,000 courses for people who are in receipt of benefits and have no recent ICT experience. We are also making £15 million available for a scheme—'Computers Within Reach'—to pilot arrangements for those who cannot afford new computers to acquire reconditioned computers. Older learners, including those on the recently launched New Deal 50-plus, who are eligible can receive support under these programmes.

Schools (Volunteer Assistants)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has for the vetting of volunteer assistants helping in schools. [118737]

Ms Estelle Morris: Existing arrangements provide for volunteers working in schools who have regular contact with pupils to be checked against my Department's list of people who are barred from such employment (List 99) and schools must not use the services of anyone who is barred. If a volunteer working in a school will have substantial unsupervised access to pupils on a regular basis the school should also arrange a criminal record check on the person.

There are no new proposals aimed specifically at volunteer assistants working in schools. However, officials in my Department are working closely with their counterparts in other Departments on a number of measures aimed at improving protection for children from unsuitable people. In particular, the implementation of the new arrangements for criminal record checks set out in Part V of the Police Act 1997, the provisions of the Protection of Children Act 1999, and the proposals in Part II of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill. Those measures will apply to volunteers who work with children as well as paid staff.

Special Needs

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the budget for 2000–01 for training teachers in special educational needs. [118556]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* Under the Standards Fund for 2000–01, the Department is supporting expenditure to a total of £26 million to provide in-service training in special educational needs. The Teacher Training Agency is also providing £21 million per year in support of in-service courses, and SEN is a priority within this. In addition, the School Improvement Grant for 2000–01 of £290.5 million can be used to support training teachers in special educational needs.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers are being trained to provide for teaching children with special educational needs, broken down by area of specialism. [118557]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* All teachers, as part of their initial teacher training, are trained to deal with special educational needs and must meet the standards set in order to gain qualified teacher status. In addition, special educational needs feature in induction standards, which all teachers must meet at the end of their induction year in order to be able to teach.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average time given to SEN training in *(a)* PGCE and *(b)* BEd courses. [118558]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* This information is not collected centrally. In order to secure qualified teacher status (QTS), students must be able to demonstrate that they can identify pupils with special educational needs, know where to go to get help in order to give positive and targeted support and are familiar with

the requirements of the Code of Practice on identification and assessment of SEN, including requirements with regard to the keeping of pupils' records.

Primary Schools

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure the viability of primary schools with small rolls. [118662]

Ms Estelle Morris: The viability of a school may depend on a range of factors and differ according to the particular situation in the area. It is for the local education authority to plan the provision of places in order to maximise parental preference and ensure good-quality education cost-effectively. Local education authorities have freedom in the budgets they delegate to schools to recognise the additional unit costs of small schools. We are establishing a Small School Support Fund from September to enable small schools to pilot innovative approaches to joint working and other forms of collaboration, and funds are being made available over 1999–2001 to provide more administrative support staff in small schools. There is also a presumption against the closure of schools in rural areas, where access to alternative provision may be more difficult.

Leeds LEA

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many times his Department's officials have met headteachers in Leeds *(a)* since the publication of the Ofsted Inspection report on the local education authority and *(b)* since the appointment of PricewaterhouseCoopers as consultants on future structures. [118547]

Ms Estelle Morris: As part of its policy outreach function, DfEE's Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU) has an adviser with responsibility for maintaining contact with Leeds LEA. The Education Adviser meets headteachers in a range of circumstances, from one-to-one discussions to larger group meetings. In the period between the publication of Ofsted's report and the appointment of PricewaterhouseCoopers four such meetings took place, involving 12 headteachers. To date, since the appointment of PwC, 13 such meetings have taken place, involving 53 headteachers. In addition, following the publication of Ofsted's report, Professor Michael Barber, Head of SEU, and I met a larger group of Leeds heads—approximately 200 in number—to explain DfEE's objectives for Leeds and to hear their views. Subsequently, following PwC's appointment I met five heads on a school visit and Professor Barber has met a group of 45 heads—following up discussion at our earlier meeting.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many times his Department's officials met PricewaterhouseCoopers staff since their appointment as consultants following the publication of the Ofsted report on Leeds LEA; and for what purpose. [118546]

Ms Estelle Morris: DfEE officials meet on a regular basis with individuals and groups from PricewaterhouseCoopers—including those currently involved in various ways in the Leeds consultancy—and for a range of reasons. These include bidding for intervention consultancy; feedback on such bids; development of framework contracts for intervention work; the discussion of current consultancy loads; and availability for further work.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what monitoring procedures he will apply to ensure the objectivity of the work of the consultants appointed as a result of the Ofsted report on Leeds local education authority. [118545]

Ms Estelle Morris: PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC) are working to a brief agreed jointly by Leeds LEA and DfEE. PwC report progress against that brief fortnightly to a project steering group. The project steering group comprises DfEE officials and Leeds LEA officers and is chaired in rotation.

Remploy 21

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has regarding *(a)* grant levels, *(b)* Government procurement policies and *(c)* employment service policies to support the new Remploy 21 proposals. [117604]

Ms Hodge: There are no plans to increase Remploy's grant at present. However, Remploy has received an additional £1.5 million, both this year and last, to modernise its factories and to improve progressions to mainstream employment, and a similar amount will be available in 2001–02.

If Remploy wishes to ask for further money to support the implementation of Remploy 21 then I will consider its request.

The Government cannot change their procurement policies, which comply with EC regulations. Remploy 21 is an internal plan for the strategic development of the Company. The Employment Service is working closely with Remploy to deliver the Remploy 21 strategy.

Schools (Somerset and Yeovil)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many temporary classrooms there are in schools in *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* the Yeovil constituency; and if he will make a statement. [118640]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not held centrally.

While temporary classrooms perform a useful function in many schools, we are concerned about the length of time some units have been in use. That is why a substantial element of the latest round of the New Deal for Schools programme, which is being announced today, is being targeted at replacing with permanent accommodation those temporary classrooms which are in the poorest condition. Around £150 million is being allocated to support the removal of some 1,500 temporary classrooms.

Local Authority Child Care

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans the Government

have to change legislation to enable local authorities to charge recipients of Working Families Tax Credit for the child care they provide. [118893]

Ms Hodge: Local authorities are currently unable to pass on any of the costs of the child care they provide to parents who receive Working Families Tax Credit or Disabled Person's Tax Credit. Some of these families have sufficient incomes but nevertheless have their child care provided free of charge. We will be introducing an amendment to the Local Government Bill which will allow local authorities to charge for the child care they provide, but will still require them to exempt parents of children in need.

DEFENCE

Armoured Regiments

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in re-roling an armoured regiment into a joint nuclear, biological and chemical weapons regiment; and if he will make a statement. [117490]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The Joint Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (JNBC) Regiment was established on 1 April 1999. It includes the majority of personnel from 1st Royal Tank Regiment who re-roled on return from Germany in summer 1999. However, one squadron and the Reconnaissance Troop from 1st Royal Tank Regiment continue to provide the Armoured Demonstration Squadron element of the Combined Arms Training Centre at Warminster. The JNBC Regiment conducted a series of exercises towards the end of 1999 and declared that it had reached its Initial Operating Capability at the end of December.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in restructuring the armoured regiments; and if he will make a statement. [117488]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The new establishments have been agreed and the additional fourth squadrons will be formed by 2002.

AS90 Regiment

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the creation of the sixth AS90 regiment; and if he will make a statement. [117497]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* 19 Regiment Royal Artillery completed its conversion to AS90 by 19 November last year. It is currently in Colchester, with two batteries, and the current plan is that it will move to Larkhill in 2003–04 when two further batteries currently in Germany will bring the Regiment up to full strength.

Kosovo

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Challenger II tanks are in Kosovo; and how many miles they have covered. [117485]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The UK has 16 Challenger II tanks deployed in Kosovo. Up to 26 March, they had covered some 3,631 kilometres since first deploying on 8 February this year.

Infantry Battalions

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made on the reconfiguring of infantry battalions to form a third mechanised brigade; and if he will make a statement. [117496]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The two infantry battalions equipped with Saxon vehicles will become part of 12 Mechanised Brigade in April this year, with the armoured infantry battalion joining in August this year.

5 Airborne Brigade

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress his Department has made in converting the 5 Airborne Brigade into a mechanised brigade; and if he will make a statement. [117493]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The headquarters of 12 Mechanised Brigade was operational by the end of December 1999 and it has already taken its armoured regiment under command. The two battalions equipped with Saxon vehicles are joining the Brigade in April this year and the armoured infantry battalion joins in August this year.

Scottish Regiments

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* establishment strength, *(b)* actual strength and *(c)* bases of all Scottish regiments. [117666]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 5 April 2000]:* The current UK trained strength, the establishment strength and location of each Scottish regiment, as at 1 March 2000, are shown in the table.

Regiment	*Trained strength*	*UKTAP [1] liability*	*Location*
1 SG (Scots Guards)	555	620	Ballykinler
F COY SG (Scots Guards)	120	108	London
1 RS (Royal Scots)	493	620	Colchester
1 RHF (Royal Highland Fusiliers)	626	670	Fallingbostel
1 KOSB (Kings Own Scottish Borderers)	563	620	Cyprus
1 BW (Black Watch)	516	620	Fort George
1 HLDRS (The Highlanders)	515	667	Catterick
1 A&SH (Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders)	608	620	Edinburgh
Scots Dragoon Guards	432	511	Fallingbostel

[1] The figures are for UK trained army personnel only, and exclude locally employed personnel, Royal Irish (Home Service) personnel, full time reserve service personnel, and Gurkhas.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many refits the three Invincible Class carriers will have before they leave service; and if he will estimate the cost of each refit. [118266]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Ark Royal is currently undergoing refit at Rosyth. On current plans for the introduction of replacement carriers, there will be a further two refits of Invincible Class carriers.

The cost of the refits will depend on the scope of work to be undertaken, for which planning work has only recently commenced. The refit of Ark Royal is due to complete in late 2001 at a planned cost of about £116 million, subject to any additional unforeseen work.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the operating cost of each of the Invincible Class carriers in each of the past three years. [118267]

Mr. Spellar: The operating costs of Invincible Class carriers, over the last three financial years, were in the order of:

£ million

	HMS Invincible	*HMS Illustrious*	*HMS Ark Royal*
1997–98	46.9	35.8	3.8
1998–99	41.5	42.4	5.0
1999–2000	51.8	37.5	63.8

These costs include manpower, fuel, port and harbour dues, maintenance and maintenance stores and, in the case of HMS Ark Royal, refit costs, but not the cost of the Air Group when embarked. HMS Invincible and HMS Illustrious have each undergone extended docking/maintenance periods, which largely account for year on year variations. HMS Ark Royal was in a period of extended readiness prior to commencing her refit in May 1999.

Random Drug Tests

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date random drug tests were introduced for service personnel; if he will set for out each regiment the number of positive test results for each major category of illegal drugs; how many *(a)* soldiers and *(b)* officers have been subjected to disciplinary action; and how many have been discharged from the services as a result. [117254]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* Random compulsory drug testing (CDT) was introduced fully in the Army on 2 May 1995, in the Naval Service on 1 April 1997 and in the RAF on 1 November 1998. The Services regard drug taking as a matter of the utmost seriousness and a positive test will, in most cases, lead to an administrative discharge from the Service. The table shows, by category of illegal drug, the number of positive drug test results, following a compulsory drug test, recorded by other ranks in each of the three Services. No officer has tested positive in any of the Services since CDT was introduced. The second table also records those who have been subsequently administratively discharged.

Number of compulsory drugs test results (January 1995 to March 2000)

	Class of drug								
	RN			*Army*			*RAF*		
	A	*B*	*C*	*A*	*B*	*C*	*A*	*B*	*C*
1995	—	—	—	11	118	0	—	—	—
1996	—	—	—	15	281	0	—	—	—
1997	0	14	0	35	483	1	—	—	—
1998	3	12	0	40	401	0	0	1	0
1999	5	28	0	107	364	14	2	8	0
2000[1]	4	6	0	37	100	0	1	2	0

[1] To date

Note:

It should be noted that some individuals have tested positive for more than one type of drug.

Numbers of personnel subsequently administratively discharged

	RN	*Army*	*RAF*
1995	—	104	—
1996	—	178	—
1997	13	426	—
1998	13	336	1
1999	30	255	7
2000[1]	9	111	1

[1] To date

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Welsh Committee Costs

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, how much was spent in the last year for which figures are available on *(a)* the Welsh Grand Committee and *(b)* the Welsh Affairs Committee. [117821]

Mr. Kirkwood: The costs of meetings of the Welsh Grand Committee at Westminster are not separately identified. In 1998–99 the Committee met once away from Westminster, at Aberaeron, in February 1999. Additional costs to the House of that meeting were £6,417.12.

In respect of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the Committee incurred the following costs during the financial year 1998–99:

Costs incurred	*£*
Overseas visits	12,646.22
UK visits	21,426.20
Specialist Advisers' Fees and Expenses	10,375.83
Work commissioned, specialist publications, interpretation	884.20
Transcription of evidence	26,224.24
Witnesses' expenses	802.79
Total	72,359.48

Staff costs are not separately identified. Details of the work of the Committee may be found in the Sessional Return for 1998–998, HC 1.

House Sittings

Mr. Radice: To ask the President of the Council how many times the House has sat after *(a)* 10.30 pm, *(b)* 11 pm and *(c)* midnight (i) in the current session and (ii) in each of the last two sessions. [118757]

Mrs. Beckett: The information requested is as follows:

Session	Number of occasions on which House rose between 10:31 and 11.00 pm	between 11:01 pm and midnight	00:01 or later
1999–2000 to date	13	8	16
1998–99	29	19	23
1997–98	55	26	34

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Libraries (Shropshire)

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list for each constituency in Shropshire, the branch libraries which were *(a)* downgraded, *(b)* closed and *(c)* opened (i) between 1979 to 1997 and (ii) since May 1997. [118538]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Information about the annual number of libraries opened or closed is not collected centrally. However, data about the number of libraries operated by each library authority are set out in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's annual publication "Public Library Statistics", which can be consulted in the House Library, and from which year-to-year changes can be established.

WALES

Employment

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the number of people who have moved from benefits into work in Wales since May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [116235]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In Wales, the number of claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance leaving the claimant count and known to have found work as the reason for ceasing their claim was 281,940 between 8 May 1997 and 10 February 2000, the latest date for which figures are available.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117805]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Following devolution, the Wales Office was established on 1 July 1999, and employs one lawyer who works four days per week.

In 1995 the former Welsh Office employed 23 lawyers in established posts, excluding trainees and probationers.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Regulatory Reform

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which Minister in his Department has responsibility for regulatory reform; and if he will make a statement. [117424]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 4 April 2000]:* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) on 4 April 2000, *Official Report,* column 385W.

Metropolitan Police Searches

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many searches were conducted of *(a)* white people and *(b)* ethnic minority persons per 1,000 population in each borough in the Metropolitan police area in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 1998–99; and for each borough what was (A) the ratio of ethnic minority searches to white searches in (1) 1996, (2) 1997 and (3) 1998 and (B) the ratio of ethnic minority arrests to white arrests in (x) 1996, (y) 1997 and (z) 1998. [118275]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has provided the information requested in the tables.

The table showing population data based on the Metropolitan Police District 1998 mid-year estimate of the 1991 census for London boroughs provides information on population data used in the calculation for the other three tables.

Per 1,000 population

Borough	Stop and searches		Arrests resulting from stop and searches		Ratio of ethnic minority rate to white rate	
	White	Ethnic minority	White	Ethnic minority	Stop and search	Arrests resulting from stop/search
1996 (1 January to 31 December)						
Barking and Dagenham	18.7	34.7	2.4	5.9	1.8	2.5
Barnet	18.1	22.7	1.5	2.1	1.3	1.4
Bexley	28.5	30.8	3.7	4.2	1.1	1.1
Brent	22.0	42.4	2.1	4.3	1.9	2.0
Bromley	28.0	60.6	3.2	10.0	2.2	3.1
Camden	71.7	151.7	6.8	13.8	2.1	2.0
City of Westminster	98.4	207.8	12.0	23.4	2.1	1.9
Croydon	20.8	40.3	2.4	5.7	1.9	2.4

Per 1,000 population

Borough	Stop and searches		Arrests resulting from stop and searches		Ratio of ethnic minority rate to white rate	
	White	Ethnic minority	White	Ethnic minority	Stop and search	Arrests resulting from stop/search
Ealing	17.4	44.2	1.8	4.7	2.5	2.7
Enfield	24.0	30.4	3.6	4.8	1.3	1.3
Greenwich	62.1	90.5	5.1	9.5	1.5	1.9
Hackney	42.0	79.7	6.0	11.9	1.9	2.0
Hammersmith and Fulham	38.7	124.3	4.4	15.1	3.2	3.5
Haringey	19.9	49.2	2.3	6.6	2.5	2.8
Harrow	12.5	23.7	1.5	2.7	1.9	1.8
Havering	17.9	34.6	1.8	5.6	1.9	3.1
Hillingdon (including Heathrow Airport)	16.6	28.6	1.1	2.6	1.7	2.3
Hounslow	22.2	41.8	2.4	4.3	1.9	1.8
Islington	52.4	115.8	4.4	10.5	2.2	2.4
Kensington and Chelsea	41.4	205.4	5.0	25.7	5.0	5.1
Kingston-upon-Thames	22.0	29.8	2.2	3.9	1.4	1.8
Lambeth	43.9	102.1	5.5	13.5	2.3	2.4
Lewisham	27.9	51.6	2.9	6.3	1.9	2.2
Merton	21.8	30.7	1.6	3.0	1.4	1.9
Newham	27.0	38.7	3.0	5.3	1.4	1.8
Redbridge	24.7	42.6	2.7	5.3	1.7	1.9
Richmond-upon-Thames	8.6	36.3	0.9	5.2	4.2	5.9
Southwark	70.5	141.3	9.1	21.1	2.0	2.3
Spelthorne[1]	14.1	28.6	1.7	2.9	2.0	1.7
Sutton	22.4	44.3	2.2	5.7	2.0	2.6
Tower Hamlets	49.7	102.0	5.7	8.2	2.0	1.4
Waltham Forest	21.4	54.5	2.0	5.8	2.5	2.9
Wandsworth	28.6	80.6	2.9	9.4	2.8	3.3
1997 (1 January to 31 December)						
Barking and Dagenham	23.2	62.7	3.0	9.0	2.7	3.0
Barnet	19.8	27.6	1.8	2.5	1.4	1.4
Bexley	31.2	36.5	3.6	5.5	1.2	1.5
Brent	28.5	59.9	2.6	6.4	2.1	2.4
Bromley	26.4	61.0	2.5	7.2	2.3	2.9
Camden	83.9	200.7	8.2	16.4	2.4	2.0
City of Westminster	114.3	268.2	13.1	27.5	2.3	2.1
Croydon	28.3	64.6	2.1	8.3	2.3	2.6
Ealing	19.1	54.4	1.8	5.1	2.9	2.8
Enfield	26.5	47.9	2.9	6.2	1.8	2.1
Greenwich	63.1	95.3	6.2	11.4	1.5	1.8
Hackney	37.9	87.5	4.7	10.1	2.3	2.1
Hammersmith and Fulham	43.5	144.5	5.1	15.9	3.3	3.1
Haringey	23.1	58.5	2.9	8.3	2.5	2.9
Harrow	18.5	32.7	2.6	4.8	1.8	1.9
Havering	23.9	51.1	2.5	8.5	2.1	3.4
Hillingdon (including Heathrow Airport)	14.9	39.9	1.2	2.8	2.7	2.3
Hounslow	24.0	53.5	3.2	7.3	2.2	2.3
Islington	51.0	125.5	5.5	12.1	2.5	2.2
Kensington and Chelsea	41.2	198.9	4.2	22.4	4.8	5.3
Kingston-upon-Thames	26.1	52.3	3.0	5.7	2.0	1.9
Lambeth	40.5	99.7	5.5	13.3	2.5	2.4
Lewisham	36.7	70.0	3.5	7.5	1.9	2.2
Merton	20.6	26.3	2.4	3.1	1.3	1.3
Newham	27.8	42.2	3.0	5.3	1.5	1.8
Redbridge	27.0	57.0	3.5	6.8	2.1	2.0
Richmond-upon-Thames	9.8	47.9	0.9	4.0	4.9	4.3
Southwark	76.4	175.1	9.6	22.5	2.3	2.4
Spelthorne[1]	16.1	31.9	2.1	4.6	2.0	2.1
Sutton	23.8	50.5	2.6	5.9	2.1	2.2
Tower Hamlets	56.7	149.2	5.3	9.2	2.6	1.7
Waltham Forest	20.0	67.0	2.3	7.4	3.3	3.3
Wandsworth	27.9	76.4	2.9	9.3	2.7	3.2
1998–99 (1 April to 31 March)						
Barking and Dagenham	25.1	80.7	4.3	13.7	3.2	3.2
Barnet	15.4	22.4	1.9	2.9	1.5	1.6
Bexley	25.5	35.6	3.5	5.1	1.4	1.5
Brent	25.0	54.8	3.4	7.4	2.2	2.2
Bromley	24.8	78.6	2.8	10.7	3.2	3.8
Camden	74.4	183.7	9.2	17.6	2.5	1.9
City of Westminster	115.1	265.9	14.9	30.6	2.3	2.1

Per 1,000 population

Borough	Stop and searches		Arrests resulting from stop and searches		Ratio of ethnic minority rate to white rate	
	White	Ethnic minority	White	Ethnic minority	Stop and search	Arrests resulting from stop/search
Croydon	23.8	51.0	3.1	7.1	2.1	2.3
Ealing	18.3	59.3	2.4	6.6	3.2	2.7
Enfield	30.3	48.7	4.0	6.7	1.6	1.7
Greenwich	58.9	85.4	7.2	10.8	1.4	1.5
Hackney	31.2	68.0	4.0	9.7	2.2	2.4
Hammersmith and Fulham	42.7	130.3	5.6	17.9	3.1	3.2
Haringey	23.6	56.3	3.4	9.7	2.4	2.9
Harrow	21.0	37.1	2.9	5.6	1.8	1.9
Havering	20.6	49.3	2.3	6.9	2.4	2.9
Hillingdon (including Heathrow Airport)	15.6	41.6	1.8	4.6	2.7	2.6
Hounslow	19.9	48.0	3.6	7.4	2.4	2.1
Islington	47.7	113.5	5.3	14.6	2.4	2.7
Kensington and Chelsea	26.1	114.4	2.7	12.9	4.4	4.7
Kingston-upon-Thames	31.3	60.2	5.4	11.5	1.9	2.1
Lambeth	32.0	75.0	4.4	11.5	2.3	2.6
Lewisham	35.9	66.7	2.9	5.7	1.9	2.0
Merton	25.6	33.5	2.2	3.0	1.3	1.4
Newham	22.4	41.5	2.6	4.5	1.9	1.7
Redbridge	23.0	54.2	3.2	6.4	2.4	2.0
Richmond-upon-Thames	9.6	41.8	1.0	4.9	4.4	5.1
Southwark	78.9	150.6	11.3	23.0	1.9	2.0
Spelthorne[1]	22.9	40.3	1.7	4.2	1.8	2.5
Sutton	21.3	42.1	2.3	3.9	2.0	1.7
Tower Hamlets	34.8	105.3	5.1	10.8	3.0	2.1
Waltham Forest	14.7	52.2	2.0	7.0	3.5	3.5
Wandsworth	23.0	53.7	2.8	6.6	2.3	2.4

[1] The information provided for Spelthorne is based on the 1991 Census population data, not the updated 1998 estimates

Population data based on the Metropolitan Police District 1998 mid year estimate of the 1991 census for London boroughs

Boroughs	White	Ethnic minority
Barking and Dagenham	144,971	10,586
Barnet	270,544	61,004
Bexley	205,213	12,627
Brent	139,751	113,410
Bromley	283,233	13,885
Camden	154,949	33,660
City of Westminster	173,549	47,297
Croydon	278,760	59,457
Ealing	204,565	97,553
Enfield	227,504	37,366
Greenwich	187,688	27,405
Hackney	129,330	65,347
Hammersmith and Fulham	129,912	27,558
Haringey	157,285	64,286
Harrow	155,924	55,362
Havering	221,044	7,287
Hillingdon	220,309	30,856
Hounslow	159,902	51,679
Islington	145,181	33,779
Kensington and Chelsea	143,401	26,525
Kingston-upon-Thames	134,649	12,682
Lambeth	187,956	81,542
Lewisham	190,213	53,559
Merton	154,371	29,953
Newham	133,432	97,855
Redbridge	182,277	49,641
Richmond-upon-Thames	176,464	10,237
Southwark	175,304	56,666
Spelthorne[1]	86,913	3,074
Sutton	166,621	10,463
Tower Hamlets	116,761	64,490
Waltham Forest	164,795	56,603
Wandsworth	212,342	53,242

[1] Information on Spelthorne is based on the 1991 census, not the 1998 mid year estimate

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* white persons and *(b)* ethnic minority persons were stopped and searched in each borough in the Metropolitan police area in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997 and (iii) 1998–99; and how many stops and searches resulted in arrest in each case. [118274]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has provided the information requested, which is set out in the tables.

1 January to 31 December 1996

Borough	Stop and Searches		Arrests resulting from Stop and Searches	
	White	Ethnic Minority	White	Ethnic Minority
Barking and Dagenham	2,717	367	343	62
Barnet	4,893	1,387	407	128
Bexley	5,852	389	754	53
Brent	3,077	4,813	295	488
Bromley	7,944	841	914	139
Camden	11,113	5,107	1,057	465

1 January to 31 December 1996

Borough	Stop and Searches		Arrests resulting from Stop and Searches	
	White	Ethnic Minority	White	Ethnic Minority
City of Westminster	17,075	9,827	2,085	1,107
Croydon	5,804	2,396	660	341
Ealing	3,552	4,313	358	462
Enfield	5,468	1,137	815	180
Greenwich	11,662	2,479	954	261
Hackney	5,437	5,209	775	780
Hammersmith and Fulham	5,022	3,426	566	416
Haringey	3,130	3,162	369	425
Harrow	1,944	1,312	233	148
Havering	3,949	252	397	41
Hillingdon[1]	3,661	881	248	79
Hounslow	3,555	2,161	377	224
Islington	7,605	3,911	633	356
Kensington and Chelsea	5,938	5,449	719	681
Kingston upon Thames	2,961	378	296	50
Lambeth	8,243	8,323	1,042	1,102
Lewisham	5,306	2,766	546	338
Merton	3,362	921	241	90
Newham	3,600	3,790	399	523
Redbridge	4,496	2,113	493	261
Richmond upon Thames	1,525	372	156	53
Southwark	12,353	8,005	1,601	1,196
Spelthorne	1,229	88	149	9
Sutton	3,735	463	363	60
Tower Hamlets	5,808	6,575	667	531
Waltham Forest	3,529	3,085	336	330
Wandsworth	6,082	4,292	606	503
MPS Total	181,627	99,990	19,854	11,882

[1] Including Heathrow Airport

1 January to 31 December 1997

Borough	Stop and Searches		Arrests resulting from Stop and Searches	
	White	Ethnic Minority	White	Ethnic Minority
Barking and Dagenham	3,367	664	433	95
Barnet	5,359	1,686	488	154
Bexley	6,404	461	746	70
Brent	3,980	6,794	369	730
Bromley	7,479	847	699	100
Camden	13,007	6,754	1,272	551
City of Westminster	19,837	12,683	2,265	1,303
Croydon	7,897	3,842	875	494
Ealing	3,901	5,304	366	494
Enfield	6,040	1,788	670	230
Greenwich	11,848	2,613	1,172	312
Hackney	4,899	5,716	612	662
Hammersmith and Fulham	5,651	3,981	668	437
Haringey	3,633	3,762	449	534
Harrow	2,881	1,811	401	264
Havering	5,291	372	556	62
Hillingdon[1]	3,272	1,230	266	87
Hounslow	3,832	2,765	505	379
Islington	7,406	4,239	795	410
Kensington and Chelsea	5,908	5,275	604	594
Kingston upon Thames	3,509	663	400	72
Lambeth	7,604	8,130	1,038	1,085
Lewisham	6,977	3,751	660	401
Merton	3,175	787	373	94
Newham	3,703	4,131	401	517
Redbridge	4,929	2,829	629	340
Richmond upon Thames	1,737	490	165	41
Southwark	13,400	9,924	1,675	1,273
Spelthorne	1,401	98	185	14
Sutton	3,958	528	439	62
Tower Hamlets	6,616	9,624	619	592
Waltham Forest	3,297	3,792	374	418
Wandsworth	5,919	4,069	612	497
MPS Total	198,117	121,403	21,781	13,368

[1] Including Heathrow Airport

1 April 1998 to 31 March 1998–99

Borough	Stop and Searches		Arrests resulting from Stop and Searches	
	White	Ethnic Minority	White	Ethnic Minority
Barking and Dagenham	3,637	854	618	145
Barnet	4,173	1,365	508	178
Bexley	5,230	450	718	65
Brent	3,487	6,218	477	835
Bromley	7,030	1,092	790	148
Camden	11,535	6,183	1,430	592
City of Westminster	19,975	12,575	2,583	1,449
Croydon	6,638	3,034	853	423
Ealing	3,734	5,782	498	644
Enfield	6,883	1,818	905	249
Greenwich	11,060	2,341	1,357	296
Hackney	4,03	4,443	518	632
Hammersmith and Fulham	5,544	3,591	723	492
Haringey	3,708	3,617	529	626
Harrow	3,268	2,052	454	311
Havering	4,546	359	515	50
Hillingdon[1]	3,442	1,283	386	141
Hounslow	3,176	2,483	574	385
Islington	6,918	3,834	775	492
Kensington and Chelsea	3,743	3,035	394	343
Kingston upon Thames	4,221	763	722	146
Lambeth	6,016	6,113	835	939
Lewisham	6,836	3,572	549	305
Merton	3,953	1,002	342	90
Newham	2,991	4,065	349	436
Redbridge	4,196	2,691	592	316
Richmond upon Thames	1,694	428	169	50
Southwark	13,838	8,533	1,989	1,304
Spelthorne	1,988	124	150	13
Sutton	3,550	441	385	41
Tower Hamlets	4,069	6,789	601	698
Waltham Forest	2,428	2,953	326	397
Wandsworth	4,887	2,860	591	354
MPS Total	182,430	106,743	23,205	13,585

[1] Including Heathrow Airport

Police (Freemasons)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure public access to the register of freemasons in the police force. [118224]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are currently considering our response to the Home Affairs Committee report on Freemasonry and will be publishing our response in due course.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what permission the Animals Procedures Committee has granted for animals to be used in experiments into the effects of active and passive smoking; what species and numbers of animals are to be used in these experiments; and who is funding this research. [118037]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Animal Procedures Committee has no power to grant or refuse applications for authority to use animals in scientific procedures. Such powers are exercised by the Secretary of State.

The Government have a firm policy of not granting applications to research tobacco products and the effects of these products. No applications for work on the effects of active and passive smoking have been approved nor have any such applications been referred to the Animals Procedures Committee for advice.

Operation Nightshade

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 379W, for what reason information about the cost of Operation Nightshade is not available; and if he will make a statement. [118620]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that Operation Nightshade was an operation undertaken by the now disbanded South East Regional Crime Squad (SERCS). Records of the cost of individual SERCS operations are no longer available.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the fund-raising activities of the KLA in the UK; and what measures he has taken to stop such activities. [118245]

Mr. Straw: The police and Security Service place a high priority on countering all forms of terrorist activity in the United Kingdom, including fundraising. The investigation of any criminal activity is, of course, an operational police matter and responsibility rests with the Chief Officer of the force in the area concerned. I am not, however, aware of any evidence that members of the Kosovo Liberation Army are committing criminal offences in this country.

Immigration and Asylum

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the new asylum seeker support arrangements in part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 will be extended to cover in-country applicants. [118788]

Mr. Straw: The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), announced in the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) on 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 556–58W, that the new National Asylum Support Service (NASS) would be phased in. The first stage commenced on 3 April, when NASS took over responsibility for support for all new applicants at port, and eligibility for social security and related benefits was ended for all new applicants. The second stage was for NASS to be extended to new in-country applicants. As I told the House on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 6, we are now ready to begin this plan.

Also on Monday 10 April, my hon. Friend the Minister accordingly made a Direction which sets out that the support scheme in Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 will apply to all asylum seekers who claim asylum other than on arrival in the United Kingdom on, or after, Monday 17 April and who made the claim while in Kent. I shall announce plans to extend the new support scheme to other parts of the country at a later date.

The direction also applies to asylum seekers who are resident in Kent; who are in receipt of benefits; who get a negative decision on their asylum claim and who go on to appeal. Their benefits will end and they will be eligible for support from the NASS.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

UN Peacekeeping

20. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the future role of the United Nations in international peacekeeping. [117186]

Mr. Hain: We have held a number of important meetings with the Secretary General, both in London and New York on UN peacekeeping.

Austria

21. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met the Austrian Foreign Minister to discuss immigration and related issues. [117188]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary regularly has discussions with the Austrian Foreign Minister within the framework of the EU, and these have included consideration of asylum and immigration issues, e.g. at the Tampere Special European Council 15–16 October 1999.

Kashmir

22. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his assessment of the security situation along the line of control; and if he will make a statement on the future of Kashmir. [117189]

Mr. Hain: We are deeply troubled by continued violence in Kashmir, including along the Line of Control. We encourage India and Pakistan to find, through dialogue, a just and lasting solution acceptable to the people of Kashmir.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to discuss the situation in Kashmir with representatives of the Governments of India and Pakistan; and if he will make a statement. [118506]

Mr. Hain: We regularly raise the situation in Kashmir with the Indian and Pakistani Governments. We will continue to urge them to find, through dialogue, a just and lasting solution acceptable to the people of Kashmir.

Chile

23. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions Ministers have held with the incoming Chilean Government; and if he will make a statement. [117190]

Mr. Pollard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), held with the incoming Chilean Government during his visit to Chile between 10 and 12 March; and if he will make a statement. [117173]

Mr. Battle: I had wide-ranging discussions with members of the incoming Chilean Government, in particular the President and the Minister for the Economy, Mining and Energy. I also met the Foreign Minister, the Finance Minister, the Minister for the Interior and the Minister for Agriculture. These meetings were all friendly and constructive.

Lebanon

24. **Dr. Vis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's relations with Lebanon. [117191]

29. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Lebanon. [117196]

Mr. Hain: We enjoy good relations with Lebanon.

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

25. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" campaign. [117192]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is organising several activities in the coming months to build on the momentum generated by last year's "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow to promote the benefits of our membership of the EU. On 19 April, I will chair a seminar at Canary Wharf to assess the prospects for European economic reform following the Lisbon European Council. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will host an Open

Day on 9 May to mark Europe Day and launch its involvement in the London String of Pearls Millennium Festival. Between May and July, I plan to visit several cities in England, Scotland and Wales that will be holding Europe Days.

Hungary

26. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress of Hungary's application for membership of the European Union. [117193]

Mr. Vaz: Hungary has made good progress in its negotiations for membership of the EU since they started in March 1998. Last week we opened another two chapters of the EU acquis communautaire (on Regional Policy and Financial Control), bringing the total number of chapters currently under negotiation to 25 (out of 31). Hungary has provisionally closed seven of those chapters, is near to closing several more, and is working successfully at implementing necessary reforms. We want Hungary to join the European Union as soon as it is able to meet the obligations of membership.

Biological Weapons

27. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the prospects for a new protocol to the biological weapons convention. [117194]

Mr. Hain: In my address to the BWC Ad Hoc Group in Geneva on 23 March to mark the 25th anniversary of entry into force of the Convention, I stressed the urgent need for completion of work on the Protocol during 2000. The United Kingdom believes that this remains achievable and that a successful outcome would be a significant addition to international arms control regimes. We shall continue to work actively for this goal.

Drugs Trade

28. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of British policy on combating the trade in illicit drugs. [117195]

Mr. Battle: UK counter drugs activity overseas aims to reduce the availability of Class A drugs in the UK.

Co-ordinated inter-Departmental activity on agreed priorities has achieved results. Examples include increased seizures of heroin (up from 740 kg in 1996 to 990 kg in 1998) and cocaine (up from 1,150 kg in 1996 to 2,800 kg in 1998) through the work of over 50 Drug Liaison Officers in diplomatic posts overseas. Other initiatives such as the use of the West Indian Guard Ship on counter drugs work in the Caribbean have also led to major multi-tonne seizures of cocaine.

Ethical Foreign Policy

30. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress he has made in implementing an ethical dimension in his policy. [117197]

31. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress is being made in developing an ethical dimension to his foreign policy; and if he will make a statement. [117198]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave earlier today to the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), *Official Report*, column 167.

World Service

32. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what subjects were on the agenda for his most recent meeting with Sir Christopher Bland to discuss the funding of the BBC World Service. [117199]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not met Sir Christopher Bland to discuss the funding of the BBC World Service. He has met Mr. Mark Byford, Chief Executive of the World Service, a number of times, most recently on 16 February 2000. The World Service bid under the 2000 Spending Review was among the matters discussed then.

Europe Day

33. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to mark Europe Day. [117200]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will hold an open day to mark Europe Day on 9 May. The open day is part of the String of Pearls Millennium Festival, and aims to make the UK public more aware of the cultures of our European neighbours, and Britain's place in Europe.

Far East POWs

34. **Mr. Oaten:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Ministry of Defence about compensation for former prisoners of war held in Japan. [117201]

Mr. Battle: We have regular discussions with the Ministry of Defence about the issue of compensation for former prisoners of war of the Japanese.

Kosovo

35. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his colleagues from other member states of the European Union on the development of autonomy in Kosovo. [117202]

Mr. Vaz: I have regular discussions with my EU colleagues on all aspects of the situation in and around Kosovo. The EU is committed to the framework for Kosovo set out in UNSCR 1244. This provides for international administration in Kosovo, to be followed by arrangements to provide the people of Kosovo with substantial autonomy and self-government, and, in a final stage, a decision on Kosovo's future status.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his estimate of the number of Serbs killed in Kosovo since the end of hostilities. [118020]

Mr. Vaz: In my reply to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) on 1 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 539W, I reported to the House that there had been 430 reported murders in Kosovo in the period between KFOR's deployment there on 12 June and 25 December last year. I added that we did not have a breakdown of these figures by ethnic origin but of the 383 murders reported up to mid-November, 139 were Serbs. Since 1 January, responsibility for collecting crime statistics in Kosovo has been transferred to UNMIK, who have advised that of the 79 murders reported between 1 January and 31 March this year 19 were Serbs.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the President of the Security Council on the progress made in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1244. [118246]

Mr. Vaz: The UN Security Council has regular discussions on Kosovo and on progress made in implementing UNSCR 1244. The Council was briefed on the situation in Kosovo by Dr. Bernard Kouchner, Special Representative of the Secretary-General, on 6 March. The Council is planning a mission to Kosovo next month.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received regarding the activities of *(a)* the Kosovo Liberation Army's military police and *(b)* the KLA Intelligence Service. [118248]

Mr. Vaz: The Kosovo Liberation Army was demilitarised in September 1999 in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1244. KFOR continues to monitor closely and take action against activities by any parallel structures or institutions in Kosovo which pose a threat to KFOR's or UNMIK's objectives.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to ensure that the OSCE mission in Kosovo registers all the displaced *(a)* Albanians and *(b)* non-Albanians to enable them to vote in the forthcoming elections. [118250]

Mr. Vaz: Registration of all displaced persons within Kosovo is the responsibility of the UN/OSCE. The OSCE Head of Mission, Daan Everts, regularly briefs the OSCE Permanent Council and the British Office in Pristina has regular contacts with the task force to obtain updates on this process.

The registration of refugees outside Kosovo has been contracted by the OSCE to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The IOM has contacted all governments of countries which shelter Kosovan refugee populations for assistance in disseminating information about the registration for the elections. The Refugee Council has agreed to be the UK's contact point for the IOM.

The international community has urged the FRY authorities to allow Kosovo Serb refugees in the FRY to participate in this exercise and to encourage them to register.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what KFOR's policy is towards those held responsible for crimes against humanity in Kosovo. [118244]

Mr. Vaz: KFOR is mandated to establish a secure environment in Kosovo and to ensure public safety and order until UNMIK can take over responsibility for this task. KFOR works closely with the UN police, including in the investigation of alleged crimes against humanity. KFOR troops are authorised to detain persons indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his counterparts from the Contact Group on the security and political situation in *(a)* Kosovo and *(b)* Serbia. [118247]

Mr. Vaz: Contact Group Political Directors met in Paris on 28 March, the first meeting of the Group since the start of NATO's air campaign a year before. The discussion covered Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro. There was a large measure of consensus on the international approach and the Group agreed to meet again later this month or early in May.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many ex-KLA members have been integrated into *(a)* the Kosovo Police Service and *(b)* the Kosovo Protection Corps. [118249]

Mr. Vaz: Neither the Kosovo Police Service nor the Kosovo Protection Corps are able to specify how many ex-KLA members they currently employ. Former membership of the Kosovo Liberation Army is not an entry requirement to either of these civilian organisations. The International Organisation for Migration is making considerable efforts to assist former members of the KLA to return to civilian life and enhance their career prospects by the provision of training and job placement support.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met the UN Special Representative in Kosovo; and if he will make a statement on the progress of reconstruction in Kosovo. [118254]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met Dr. Kouchner in London on 30 March. Dr. Kouchner briefed on the security situation and on progress in political and economic reconstruction in Kosovo. He welcomed the UK's proposals to strengthen our contribution to the international policing effort in Kosovo. The Secretary of State and Dr. Kouchner agreed on the importance of taking forward democratisation, including the holding of local elections later this year, and of encouraging growth and investment in the economy in Kosovo.

Montenegro

36. **Sir David Madel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to hold further talks with the Russian Government on the current situation in Montenegro; and if he will make a statement. [117203]

Mr. Vaz: I am in regular contact with Foreign Minister Ivanov on a range of Balkans issues. Russia shares our concern to promote stability in the region, including in relation to Montenegro. I refer the hon. Member to the

answer I gave earlier in the House today to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), *Official Report*, column 177.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts about efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution of tensions in Montenegro. [118252]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is in regular contact with his European and international counterparts on questions of stability in the Balkans, including the situation in Montenegro. These discussions have been reflected most recently in the conclusions of the General Affairs Councils of 20 March and 10 April, and of the Lisbon European Council of 23–24 March.

Non-proliferation Treaty

37. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the position of Her Majesty's Government to be taken at the forthcoming review conference on the non-proliferation treaty. [117204]

Mr. Hain: We are unequivocally committed to the NPT, which remains the cornerstone of our non-proliferation policy. We have made a positive contribution to implementing the agenda agreed at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and will work for a positive outcome to this year's conference which will advance the goal of nuclear disarmament.

Falklands

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions Her Majesty's Government have had with the new Argentine Administration about the Falkland Islands. [117183]

Mr. Battle: We have established a good working relationship with the new Argentine Government. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has met President De la Rua twice. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has met the Foreign Minister Rodriguez Giavarini.

I attended the Argentine Presidential inauguration on 10 December and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has met the Argentine President and Defence Minister. I know my right hon. Friend has visited the Falklands and I can assure him of our commitment to the question of sovereignty and our commitment to the Islanders' rights to determine their own future.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he is consulting the Scottish Parliament on the proposed EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [118272]

Mr. Vaz: The Government consult the Scottish Executive on all EU issues that touch on devolved matters, including the proposed EU Charter of Rights. The Executive is, in turn, accountable to the Scottish Parliament.

Human Rights (Egypt)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received regarding the trials of human rights activists in state security courts in Egypt. [118521]

Mr. Hain: In February we received reports that the Secretary General of the Egyptian Human Rights Organisation (EOHR), Hafez Abu Sa'ada, faced the prospect of being tried by a State Security Court. I understand that Hafez has never been formally notified of the charges against him, and we will continue to follow his case closely.

European Courts

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action the Government are taking to try to prevent a conflict between the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. [118310]

Mr. Vaz: The European Court of Justice has for many years taken account of the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, although not formally bound by it. Instances where the two courts have differed in their interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights have been very rare. The Government are working to ensure that the risk of conflict does not increase as a result of the current discussions about a European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights.

US National Missile Defence System

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 408W, if, in his discussions with the US Secretary of State, he *(a)* indicated UK (i) opposition to or (ii) support for the proposed national missile defence system and *(b)* offered UK co-operation over the proposed system. [118318]

Mr. Vaz: The US has not asked for UK assistance in the deployment of the proposed National Missile Defence system, nor would we expect them to do so until after a US decision on whether or not to proceed with its deployment. In our discussions with the US Administration on the subject, we have made clear that the UK would consider any such request carefully. We have also welcomed the fact that the US will make their deployment decision on the basis of a number of important factors, which will include taking account of the views of Allies and the status of the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Macedonia (Mr. Richard Hudson)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to protect the rights of Mr. Richard Hudson, arrested for a driving offence in Macedonia in August 1999. [118358]

Mr. Hain: Our consular staff in Macedonia have raised Mr. Hudson's family's and our concerns for Mr. Hudson's safety with the Macedonian authorities on a number of occasions, most recently on 30 March when our Vice-Consul called on the Prison Director.

Consular staff have visited Mr. Hudson regularly since his arrest and will continue to do so during his detention. If Mr. Hudson has any concerns about his welfare we will immediately bring them to the prison authorities' attention.

Council of Europe

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the cost of the 27 March Conference at Portsmouth on promoting Europe. [118027]

Mr. Vaz: The Council of Europe Parliamentary and Public Relations Committee's visit to Portsmouth from 25–28 March was organised by the Overseas Office in the House of Commons, and the costs therefore fall within the Administration vote which is a responsibility of the House of Commons Commission.

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make an announcement on the appointment of a United Kingdom member to the Council of Europe Venice Commission. [118863]

Mr. Vaz: I am pleased to announce that I have today appointed Professor Jeffrey Jowell QC as the UK Member of the European Commission For Democracy Through Law (the Venice Commission).

Investment Sanctions (Burma)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what powers he has to impose unilateral sanctions on investment in Burma by UK-based companies. [118676]

Mr. Battle: We believe multilateral measures are more effective than unilateral ones. We have no statutory powers to impose unilateral financial sanctions against Burma in current circumstances, nor are we seeking such powers. Our policy is not to encourage trade or investment in Burma. We regularly review the adequacy of EU measures in Burma. Yesterday we persuaded EU partners to strengthen the EU Common Position on Burma.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 284W, what was the purpose of the High Commissioner's discussion with Roger Crooks since his return to Sierra Leone. [118621]

Mr. Hain: The High Commissioner encountered Mr. Crooks at a social event. Mr. Crooks told the High Commissioner about his refurbishment of a hotel in Freetown, to be used as the headquarters of UNAMSIL.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answers of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 283–84W, if notes and minutes of meetings between the High Commissioner and Roger Crooks have, in each case, been conveyed to his Department. [118622]

Mr. Hain: The High Commissioner has had no formal meetings with Mr. Crooks. We would not require him to record social discussions with Mr. Crooks.

Fylingdales

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he has for amendments to the ABM treaty to enable the upgrading of Fylingdales consequent on the development of the United States' National Missile Defense programme; and if he will make a statement. [118752]

Mr. Vaz: The United Kingdom is not a party to the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty. The question of any amendments to it is for the United States and Russia. Discussions between them on this issue continue.

Serbia and Montenegro

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effects of the embargo on *(a)* Serbia and *(b)* Montenegro. [118281]

Mr. Vaz: A number of sanctions measures are in place against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). United Nations Security Council resolution 1160 (1998) imposed an arms embargo on the FRY. The EU has imposed a number of measures on the FRY, including an arms embargo, a ban on the sale or supply of equipment which might be used for internal repression or terrorism, a ban on the sale and supply of petroleum and petroleum products, financial sanctions, a ban on flights and a targeted visa ban. These measures have included humanitarian exemptions where appropriate. Montenegro and Kosovo have been exempted from the flight ban and oil embargo, and from some aspects of financial sanctions. The flight ban on the remainder of the FRY has been suspended until the end of August.

Sanctions have put pressure on and isolated the Milosevic regime and its associates, and have limited Milosevic's ability to build up weaponry for use for external aggression or internal repression. Humanitarian exemptions and the targeting of sanctions measures on the regime have been designed to minimise the effect of sanctions on the general public of the FRY.

Britain-Russia Centre

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what formal contact his Department had with the Britain-Russia Centre during the last year; and if he will make a statement on the future relationship between his Department and the Britain-Russia Centre. [118641]

Mr. Vaz: My Department is in regular contact with the Britain-Russia Centre, including being represented in an ex-officio capacity on its Executive Committee. A statement on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's relationship with the Britain-Russia Centre is contained in the report by the Foreign Affairs Committee on Relations with Russia (page 124), copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which members of the Britain-Russia Centre were consulted as part of his Department's last Quinquennial Review into the Britain-Russia Centre. [118665]

Mr. Vaz: The individuals and organisations consulted during the 1999 Quinquennial Review of the Britain-Russia Centre included the Director, all members of staff at the Centre and also members of the Centre's Executive Committee.

Montenegro and Sandjak

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if there is an international presence in *(a)* Montenegro and *(b)* Sandjak. [118321]

Mr. Vaz: A number of international organisations, NGOs and charities maintain a presence in Montenegro. These include the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union (principally through the European Community Monitoring Mission).

We are not aware of any international organisations based specifically in the Sandjak area of Serbia.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Devon County Council

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response he has made to Devon county council's request that certain commitments from their 1999–2000 social services programme can be charged against their 2000–01 gra.. [118500]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

We have advised Devon county council that where they wish to fund ongoing projects from the Promoting Independence: Partnership Grant for 2000–01, they must be able to satisfy their auditors that they are providing the service to additional people, or more effectively than in the previous year.

Housing (South-east)

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to promote housing schemes for key workers in the South East. [116711]

Mr. Mullin: In addition to a number of existing schemes which support low cost home ownership, the Government's Housing Green Paper, "Quality and Choice: A decent home for all", invites views on a new Starter Home Initiative. This is designed to help key workers and others on low incomes to buy their own homes in areas of high house prices and high demand.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress on developing the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. [117570]

Ms Armstrong: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will launch a framework document for consultation on the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal on Wednesday 12 April. The consultation period will run until the end of June. Copies of the document will be available in the Library of the House and in the Vote Office. At the same time we will be announcing offers of funding, worth at least £312 million over the next 10 years to seven more of our New Deal for Communities pathfinder projects to support long-term strategies for change in some of our poorest neighbourhoods.

Empty Properties (North-east)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many council houses and properties owned by housing associations in the North-east have been empty for six months or more. [117975]

Mr. Mullin: The latest available information reported by local authorities to the Department indicates that on 1 April 1999 some 3,800 local authority owned dwellings (1.3 per cent. of total stock) in the North-east had been vacant for more than six months.

Equivalent figures are not available at regional level for stock owned by Registered Social Landlords.

Local Government Bill

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what environmental appraisal of the Local Government Bill he has carried out; and when he will publish the report of its findings. [118032]

Ms Armstrong: The provisions in the Local Government Bill deal primarily with the internal workings of local authorities and their councillors, and are unlikely to have significant impacts on the environment. For this reason, no substantive environmental appraisal was carried out.

Local authorities will be able to take steps under Part I of the Bill to promote and improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas. However, the environmental impact of these provisions will depend on how authorities choose to exercise their powers. In these circumstances it is not possible to conduct a meaningful environmental appraisal.

Notes on the effects of the Bill on public sector finances and public sector manpower, a summary of the Regulatory Appraisal and a statement of the Bill's compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights are included in the Explanatory Notes to the Bill.

Driving Licences

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to change the age limits for holding UK driving licences. [118198]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans to change the age limits for holding driving licences.

There are, nevertheless, plans to establish a more structured approach to pre-test learning to ensure that new drivers have a broader and more extensive experience of driving conditions before they take their test.

This was announced in the Department's new road safety strategy "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone" launched on 1 March—together with a number of other

measures, and would be subject to public consultation. Copies of the strategy are available in the Library of the House.

Road Improvements (South Wiltshire)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations *(a)* he, *(b)* his Ministers or *(c)* his officials have received from Councillor Ricky Rogers concerning the ACT Parker Plan for road improvements in South Wiltshire; and if he will make a statement. [117994]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The Secretary of State, his Ministers and his officials have not received any representations to date from Councillor Ricky Rogers concerning the ACT Parker Plan.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he intends to take forward and fund further work on the Parker Plan for road improvements in South Wiltshire; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the consultant's report on this scheme. [117993]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* I have asked the Highways Agency to place a copy of their consultant's report on the Parker Plan in the Library. There are no plans to fund any further assessment of the route proposals in the Parker Plan.

Homelessness

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many homeless households are in temporary accommodation in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* England and *(c)* Scotland; [118225]

(2) how many households were defined as homeless in *(a)* the UK, *(b)* England and *(c)* Scotland in the last year for which figures are available. [118228]

Mr. Mullin: Information on households accommodated under statutory homelessness provisions in England is published in a quarterly Information Bulletin, "Statistics of local authority activities under the homelessness legislation: England". Table 2 of the Bulletin presents a summary of those households accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts. Tables 5 and 6 show the number of these households in accommodation arranged by the local authority, as at the end of each quarter.

Copies of the Bulletin are held in the Library and the latest edition, published on 15 March, presents statistics up to and including the fourth quarter of 1999.

For information about other parts of the United Kingdom, I refer my hon. Friend to my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Housing Registers

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were excluded from housing registers in (a)1996, (b) 1997, (c) 1998 and *(d)* 1999. [118227]

Mr. Mullin: This information is not held centrally.

Wildlife

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the annual cost of maintaining the Wildlife Inspectorate; and what plans he has to increase the funds available. [118339]

Mr. Mullin: The annual cost of maintaining the Inspectorate is £158,500; and there are no plans to increase the current level of funding.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the role of the Wildlife Inspectorate; what criteria he uses to monitor its effectiveness; and if he will make a statement. [118338]

Mr. Mullin: The Wildlife Inspectorate's key role is to discharge the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions' inspection responsibilities in accordance with sections 7(6) and 14(5) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 in England and Wales; and regulations 9(4) and 9(5) of the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 1997 in the United Kingdom. It undertakes a range of inspection programmes throughout the year to gather and verify information to enable informed decisions on the licensing of trade in endangered species and on the registration of birds of prey.

Wildlife Inspectors also provide specialist advice on species identification to assist the Police and HM Customs and Excise officials during wildlife-related investigations.

The Wildlife Inspectorate plays an important role as a deterrent to those who may otherwise consider acting outside of the legislation. While this deterrent effect is hard to quantify, results from a DETR questionnaire issued to 1,436 registered keepers of Schedule 4 birds in 1993 showed that 89 per cent. of respondents considered inspection programmes to be an effective way of monitoring the registration scheme, and 76 per cent. felt that inspections acted as a significant deterrent against the illegal taking of wild birds.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he will take in response to the recommendations of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee on the effectiveness of wildlife species protection legislation. [118337]

Mr. Mullin: In Autumn 1998, my Department requested the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to review the effectiveness of the species protection Schedules to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The JNCC have recently concluded their review and advise that the Schedules have been generally effective in deterring persecution of the species listed, that they should be retained to give legal protection to appropriate animals and plants and also make a number of recommendations.

I am already actively considering all of the issues raised in the JNCC's recommendations.

The recommendations concerning enforcement of wildlife legislation relate to those made last year by the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime and are being addressed in the context of the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill.

I recognise that improvements to protection for threatened species in the wider countryside beyond the provisions of this Bill may be warranted and am considering what might be appropriate. Some measures may not necessarily require primary legislation, including JNCC's recommendation concerning the Quinquennial Review of the Schedules. I look forward to receiving JNCC's advice at the next Quinquennial Review in due course.

I also agree the problem caused by invasive alien species does need to be addressed and we plan to review the effectiveness of policy concerning non-native species which can present an ecological threat to the United Kingdom's indigenous wildlife.

Mobile Telephone Masts (Croydon)

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many mobile telephone masts *(a)* over and *(b)* under 15 metres high there are in the London Borough of Croydon. [118523]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government do not hold this information.

Departmental Spending

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out detailed future spending plans for his Department. [118771]

Mr. Prescott: I have today published my Department's Annual Report for 2000, and copies have been placed in the House Libraries. The Report sets out the Department's achievements over the last year and its detailed plans to continue to meet our over-arching aim of improving everyone's quality of life, now and for the future.

DIYSO Scheme

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many houses have been allocated to owner/tenants under the DIYSO scheme in each of the last five years; and by which local authorities. [118755]

Mr. Mullin: The total number of units provided under the DIYSO (Do it Yourself Shared Ownership) scheme in England over the last five years is 11,887, of which 1,235 were funded by local authorities and 10,652 by the Housing Corporation.

I will write to the hon. Member with a detailed breakdown by local authority area of the number of units provided through the DIYSO over the past five years.

Housebuilding (England)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the housebuilding requirement figures for each of the English regions not already released. [118767]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Proposed housing provision figures have now been published by regional planning bodies for all the English regions, apart from the North West and the West Midlands which will follow later this year and in 2001 respectively. These proposals will be considered at public examinations into the draft Regional Planning Guidance. Subject to any proposed changes published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and consultation on those, final RPG will then be issued. The current target timetable for the publication of final RPG in each of these regions is as follows:

Region	*Target for issue of revised RPG*
North East	Summer 2001
East Midlands	Summer 2001
South West	Winter 2000–01
West Midlands	Autumn 2002
Yorkshire and Humberside	Summer 2001
North West	End 2001

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what analysis he has made of the age profile of those people likely to inhabit the new houses he has recently announced in the South East and East of England regions. [118766]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Table 4 (page 41) of the "Projections of households in England to 2021" (ISBN 1851123261) sets out the household projections for England by age, gender and marital status. A copy of this publication is in the Library.

Press Officers

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the press officers appointed to his Department since 1997 have *(a)* declared political affiliations with the Labour Party and *(b)* have held previous positions (i) with the Labour party and (ii) with Labour party members. [118756]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Press officers in my Department are recruited on merit on the basis of fair and open competition. Political affiliation or previous association with any political party is not relevant and is not recorded.

All civil servants must abide by the Civil Service Code. This makes clear that they should conduct themselves with integrity, impartiality and honesty. In addition, the Civil Service Management Code sets out principles underpinning restrictions on civil servants' participation in political activities.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department keeps a register of contaminated land in the UK. [118764]

Mr. Mullin: My Department does not keep a central register of contaminated land in England. Under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, which institutes a new regime for contaminated land, and which came into force on 1 April 2000 in respect of England, local authorities must keep a register of land in their area which they determine is contaminated land under that regime. Arrangements in the other parts of the United Kingdom are matters for the Northern Ireland departments, the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has for imposing environmental obligations on owners of land which was contaminated prior to their ownership. [118765]

Mr. Mullin: In 1995, Parliament inserted Part IIA into the Environmental Protection Act 1990. This sets out a new regime for dealing with contaminated land., which came into full effect in England from 1 April 2000. Under it, where land is identified as contaminated and the person or persons who caused or knowingly permitted the contamination cannot be found, the owner or occupier of the land can be required, subject to the provisions of the Act, to carry out the necessary remediation. These provisions restate obligations which have existed as part of the statutory nuisance regime since 1860. Although the Government consider that some amendments to the new regime are desirable, we have no proposals to change this aspect.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will reply to the questions from the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham tabled for answer on 13 and 17 March, Refs 114399, 114400 and 115124. [118763]

Mr. Hill: I replied to the hon. Member's questions 114399 and 114400 on 7 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 605W. I will reply to question 115124 in due course.

Goods Vehicles (Parish Councils)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to permit parish councils to object to the grant of licences by the Traffic Commissioners; and if he will make a statement. [118642]

Mr. Hill: The possibility of allowing parish councils a statutory right of objection to applications for goods vehicle operator licences was considered as part of the last major review of the operator licensing system, but was ruled out at that time. This review resulted in the present legislation, the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995. Bodies which may object to licence applications, such as local authorities, are listed in the Act. There may be a case for including parish councils in this list, but it is too early to carry out another major review of the system. In the meantime, I hope that local authorities will consult parish councils on applications for operator licences which may affect them and take their views into account in considering whether to use their statutory right of objection.

Traffic Growth

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 322–23W, on traffic growth, if he will list the levels of traffic growth for the South East in *(a)* 1979, *(b)* 1990 and *(c)* for each year from 1992 to date. [118731]

Mr. Hill: The table provides annual growth estimates for all motor vehicle traffic on major roads in the South East of England from 1984 to 1998. Comparable estimates for earlier years and for traffic on minor roads are not available.

Estimated annual traffic growth on major roads in the south-east of England

Year	*Estimated annual percentage change in all motor vehicle traffic*
1984	5.8
1985	1.8
1986	9.8
1987	9.5
1988	10.1
1989	5.5
1990	0.3
1991	3.1
1992	–0.8
1993	0.8
1994	0.7
1995	2.1
1996	4.4
1997	0.3
1998	3.8

Note:
Data relate to the area covered by the South East Government Office Region

The relatively small sample sizes used to produce regional traffic growth estimates mean that the confidence intervals around the annual growth estimates provided are larger than for comparable estimates at the national level. The 95 per cent. confidence interval surrounding the above figures is of the order of plus or minus 4 per cent. This compares to an interval of plus or minus 2 per cent. for the same data at the Great Britain level.

The 1999 traffic growth estimates will be published in May.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Domestic Violence

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what responses have been received by the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law to the consultation paper on parental contact in cases where there is domestic violence; and when it is expected that the results of the consultation will be published. [118031]

Jane Kennedy: A report of the results of the consultation will be published by the Advisory Board tomorrow. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Public Trust Office

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor will announce his proposals for the reform of the Public Trust Office. [118894]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor has today published "Making Changes—The Future of the Public Trust Office", setting out his plans for reform of the Public Trust Office.

The Public Trust Office, an executive agency of the Lord Chancellor's Department, was established in 1994. It incorporates three separate functions:

Its Mental Health Sector deals with matters under Part VII of the Mental Health Act 1983: The Sector's Protection Division overseas the activities of private receivers appointed by the Court of Protection to manage financial affairs for mentally incapacitated individuals. Its Receivership Division manages the financial affairs of mentally incapacitated people who have no one else to manage their finances. The Sector also deals with matters under the Enduring Powers of Attorney Act 1985.

The Court Funds Office is a banking and investment service for funds deposited in court. These are held under jurisdiction of the Chief Executive of the Public Trust Office, acting as Accountant General of the Supreme Court.

The Public Trustee acts as an executor or trustee in respect of estates and settlements.

In November 1999, the Lord Chancellor published the Quinquennial Review of the Public Trust Office. He welcomed the Review's clear diagnosis of the challenges faced by the Public Trust Office, agreed that radical change was required and undertook to explore the Review's recommendations in a programme of change.

The Change Programme for the Public Trust Office, announced today, will improve services received by clients and, in particular, the vulnerable. The Government's overriding objective will be to ensure that the interests of the Public Trust Office's clients are fully protected. The changes proposed will deliver a step change in the quality of services. This will be achieved through centralised planning and monitoring, balanced by service delivery through those agencies which are best placed to meet the needs of clients. Where this means establishing new partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors, we will do this. Throughout the reforms, we will target resources on those clients who are most in need.

The Lord Chancellor will separate the disparate functions of the existing Public Trust Office, transferring the Trust function and the Court Funds Office to the bodies best placed to provide them: the office of the Official Solicitor to the Supreme Court and the Court Service respectively. The Office's remaining core functions of oversight of receivers and functions in relation to Enduring Powers of Attorney will be reviewed to provide a cohesive and greatly improved service.

The Lord Chancellor will ensure that he retains responsibility for the most vulnerable of Public Trust Office clients. There will be clear lines of ministerial accountability for those functions remaining within the Lord Chancellor's Department and he will establish and monitor clear standards of service provision both for those functions remaining within the Department and for those services provided in future by other parts of the public sector, and in the voluntary and private sectors.

The Lord Chancellor will want to be satisfied that reform does not entail placing a greater financial burden on some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. The new regime will deliver much improved value for money. Services received will be tailored to the individual's requirements; there will be much greater advice and assistance available; and it will genuinely protect the vulnerable. A new clearer and simpler fee system will be introduced and backed by the introduction of fee remissions for those who cannot afford to pay for the services they receive.

The Lord Chancellor envisages that plans for the more significant changes proposed will be taken forward during 2000–01 with the intention that the Public Trust Office would cease to exist as a separate and distinct Office from April 2001 onwards.

The Change Programme reforms to the Public Trust Office will also play an important part in paving the way for the Government's "Making Decisions" policy proposals to modernise and clarify the law governing decision making by and on behalf of the mentally incapacitated. The Government is committed to legislating on "Making Decisions" when parliamentary time allows, and the Change Programme will provide a firm basis for these reforms.

The Lord Chancellor welcomes the views of all those who wish to comment on the reforms that he proposes to take forward.

Copies of the booklet "Making Changes—The Future of the Public Trust Office" have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Properties

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of properties in his charge are empty; and what steps are being taken by his Department to reduce the number of such properties. [116908]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 31 March 2000]:* Northern Ireland public sector property centres were surveyed as regards properties and produced these returns:

Number of vacant properties—5,995

Vacant as percentage of total—4.4 per cent.

All property centres are required to have a strategy which incorporates justifying the retention of each property held. These strategies are monitored by the Central Advisory Unit of Valuation and Lands Agency. Any property which is identified as being surplus to business requirements must be disposed of as quickly as possible in accordance with the guidelines published by Central Advisory Unit.

In the case of the housing sector, which accounts for most of the vacant property in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a number of ongoing initiatives which set out objectives and targets for reducing the number of voids.

Train Chassis Corrosion

Mr. Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his estimate of the cost to public funds arising from taking trains out of service because of chassis corrosion problems in the last three years. [117837]

Mr. Ingram: Translink have informed the Department of Regional Development that the only known cost is £615,706 for repairing corrosion to train carriage bogies.

Rateable Values

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will place in the Library a copy of the guidance given to valuation officers when determining the rateable value of buildings in Northern Ireland. [117678]

Mr. Ingram: Rating is a wide-ranging and continually evolving area of valuation law and practice. It is subject to extensive and ongoing statutory provision and a substantial body of case law.

Against this background the guidelines available to valuation officers, the majority of whom are professionally qualified surveyors, is equally extensive and wide-ranging, in terms of source and content.

In the circumstances it would be impossible to assemble all the material which is of relevance to, and impacts on, the valuation process.

Paramilitary Offences

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many paramilitary offences have been committed since the signing of the Belfast Agreement by *(a)* Republican and *(b)* Loyalist organisations, broken down by specific offence; and if he will make a statement. [117662]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 4 April 2000]:* The information requested can be found in the table:

	By Loyalist	*By Republican*	*UK*	*Total*
1. Incidents				
Deaths	14	35	1	50
Shooting incidents	n/a	n/a	—	[1]311
Bombing incidents	n/a	n/a	—	[1]188
2. Casualties as a result of paramilitary attacks				
Shooting	92	52	—	144
Assaults	182	93	—	275

[1] It is not always possible to confirm the attribution for these incidents.

Note:

It should also be noted that shooting incidents will include those incidents resulting in the 144 casualties shown in number 2 of the table and that there may have been more than one casualty in a single shooting incident.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117819]

Mr. Ingram: Some 108 lawyers are employed by the Northern Ireland Office currently. In April 1995 the numbers were 94. In addition to these figures, four lawyers are currently on career breaks and two were on career breaks in 1995. Under existing arrangements lawyers working under the direction of the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland and the Crown Solicitor for Northern Ireland are formally employed by the Northern Ireland Office.

Fire Brigade

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if new recruits to the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade receive training in dealing with civil disturbance. [118001]

Mr. George Howarth: New recruits to the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade receive training in dealing with civil disturbance incidents along the same lines as new recruits to other Fire Brigades in Great Britain.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many civil disturbance call-outs the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade has attended in each month since 1 January 1998. [118002]

Mr. George Howarth: The table sets out the number of call-outs attended by the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade where the Brigade met with hostility. These include incidents when children threw stones at appliances.

Civil disturbances attended by Northern Ireland fire brigade January 1998-February 2000

Month	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
January	17	23	26
February	20	21	12
March	46	72	—
April	35	59	—
May	58	69	—
June	59	54	—
July	743	79	—
August	54	75	—
September	33	35	—
October	47	43	—
November	29	17	—
December	15	8	—
Total	1,156	555	38

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what differences apply to the *(a)* financial and *(b)* leave arrangements within the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade in respect of (i) whole-time fire officers and (ii) retained fire officers. [118003]

Mr. George Howarth: Fire-fighters in Northern Ireland are entitled to the same rate of pay and leave as fire-fighters in Great Britain. Northern Ireland fire-fighters also receive a Northern Ireland allowance of four days additional leave. The allowance works out at £24.99 a week for whole-time fire-fighters and £1.24 extra per incident attended for retained fire-fighters. Neither the allowance nor the additional leave entitlement applies to new recruits who joined from 3 August 1999.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what differences in respect of duties, including civil disturbance call-outs, apply between *(a)* whole-time and *(b)* retained fire officers who are remunerated at different rates within the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade. [118004]

Mr. George Howarth: There are no differences in the duties of whole-time and retained fire-fighters.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what role the Labour Relations Agency played in the 1986 agreement to pay a Northern Ireland Allowance to Northern Ireland Fire Brigade officers; and if that allowance is still paid. [118005]

Mr. George Howarth: In 1986 the Labour Relations Agency acted as arbitrator in a dispute concerning the level of Northern Ireland Allowance being paid to fire-fighters. The allowance is still being paid to all personnel employed prior to 3 August 1999.

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade has had a two-tier contract of employment pay system imposed; and if he will list those fire brigades in Great Britain which operate two-tier systems. [118093]

Mr. George Howarth: In November 1998 the Chief Fire Officer of the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade wrote to the Fire Brigades Union telling them of his intention to issue new Contracts of Service to new recruits to the Fire Brigade. The new contracts, which were introduced for recruits joining from 3 August 1999, maintained the same conditions re basic pay, etc., that apply across the United Kingdom for all fire-fighters but removed a number of local conditions, one of which was the payment of the Northern Ireland Allowance. The contracts of existing fire-fighters were not affected. There is of course room for other brigades to have local pay enhancements and conditions—for example, different rates of London Weighting Allowance.

Appointment Panels

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who are the members of the appointment panels which are sitting to oversee the appointment of *(a)* the Northern Ireland Parliamentary Ombudsman and *(b)* the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service; and what are their respective (i) professions and (ii) nationalities. [118000]

Mr. Mandelson: The panel to select a new Ombudsman for Northern Ireland comprised Mr. John Semple, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service; Mrs. Margaret Elliott, a Solicitor and NI Civil Service Commissioner; and Dr. Maurice Hayes, a retired senior civil servant (former Permanent Secretary of DHSS in Northern Ireland) and a former Northern Ireland Ombudsman. In respect of the appointment of a new Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to take over from Mr. John Semple when he retires this summer, the decision lies with me subject to the approval of the Prime Minister. However, I have appointed a panel to offer advice. The panel comprises Mr. Muir Russell, Permanent Secretary of the Scottish Executive; Dame Valerie Strachan, a retired senior civil servant (former Chairman of HM Customs and Excise); and Mr. Paddy Mullarkey, a retired Irish civil servant (former Secretary General of the Department of Finance). In the past a retired senior Northern Ireland Civil Servant has assisted in the selection process for a high level post in the Irish public service. The nationality of each panel member was not ascertained to appointment to the respective panels.

HEALTH

Neurological Consultants

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the number of neurological consultants in each NHS region in each of the last 10 years. [116272]

Mr. Denham: The latest available information is shown in the table.

Hospital medical consultants in neurology by regional office 1988–1995
England at 30 September each year

Headcount

	1988	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
England	180	180	200	210	210	210	240	260
Northern	10	10	10	10	20	20	20	20
Yorkshire	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Trent	10	10	10	10	20	10	10	10
East Anglia	0	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
North West Thames	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
North East Thames	20	20	20	30	20	30	20	30
South East Thames	20	20	20	20	20	20	30	30
South West Thames	10	10	10	20	20	20	20	20
Wessex	10	10	10	10	10	20	10	10
Oxford	10	20	20	20	20	20	10	10
South Western	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	20
West Midlands	10	10	20	20	20	20	20	20
Mersey	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	20
North Western	10	10	10	10	20	20	10	20
Special Health Authorities	30	30	30	30	30	30	20	30

Notes:
1. Figures rounded to nearest 10.
2. '0' denotes 5 or less.
3. Regional totals may not equal England figure because of rounding and because some staff work in more than one region. These staff are counted under each region where they work, but only once in the England figure.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase funding of *(a)* research into screening for and *(b)* educational awareness of prostate cancer. [101686]

Yvette Cooper: I have recently announced £1 million funding for urgent research studies into prostate cancer. This is in addition to the extra £800,000 we have already committed for new prostate cancer research, which includes a £277,000 feasibility study for a trial of

treatments of localised prostate cancer detected early by a prostate cancer screening test. Funding for the main trial will be considered in the light of the findings from the feasibility study.

A range of information on men's cancers—including prostate cancer—is already freely available. Additionally, general practitioner guidelines on urgent referrals of patients with suspected prostate cancer will be published shortly, and outcomes guidance on urological cancers—including prostate cancer—will be commissioned by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence within the next two years.

Dental Services (London Area)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the number of NHS dentists working in the Greater London Authority area. [117822]

Mr. Hutton: Most people in London can get National Health Service dentistry. Since September 1998 the number of dentists in the London area has increased by 112 and there are now nearly 45 dentists in the General Dentist Service per 100,000 population. This is the highest proportion in the country.

We recognise that in some areas of London it remains difficult to access NHS dental care. Positive steps have already been taken to address this problem. NHS dentists in the London area have had Investing in Dentistry grants amounting to £660,000 and a dental access centre has been opened and three proposals for dental access centres are currently being considered by the NHS Executive. Discussions will continue with the profession at local level to improve and modernise the service.

Cosmetic Surgery

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the 10 commonest cosmetic surgical procedures carried out *(a)* in the NHS and *(b)* in the private sector in the last three years. [118193]

Ms Stuart: Surgery which is purely for cosmetic purposes is not normally undertaken by the National Health Service. Hospital Episode Statistics show that the 10 most common plastic surgery procedures carried out in the NHS in 1998–99 and the two previous years are as in the table.

Information on cosmetic surgery carried out in the private sector is not held centrally. However, details of some of the procedures undertaken in independent hospitals, including cosmetic surgery, are available in "The Public-Private Mix of Acute Hospital Care" by Professor Brian Williams (November 1999), a copy of which is in the Library.

Finished Consultant Episodes (FCEs [1]): selected diagnosis with the 10 most common operations performed in NHS hospitals England: 1996–97 to 1998–99

Primary diagnosis/operations	*FCEs*
Procedures for purposes other than remedying health state and follow-up care involving plastic surgery (ICD Z41-Z42)	
1998–99	
B31 Other plastic operations on breast	1,949
N30 Operations on prepuce	1,081
B29 Reconstruction of breast	819
B30 Prosthesis for breast	758
E02 Plastic operations on nose	457
B35 Operations on nipple	430
S60 Other operations on skin	414
S02 Plastic excision of skin of abdominal wall	335
S31 Other operations on flap of skin to other site	232
S48 Insertion of skin expander into subcutaneous tissue	189
1997–98	
B31 Other plastic operations on breast	1,641
N30 Operations on prepuce	910
B29 Reconstruction of breast	799
B30 Prosthesis for breast	638
E02 Plastic operations on nose	459
S60 Other operations on skin	365
B35 Operations on nipple	323
S02 Plastic excision of skin of abdominal wall	317
S06 Other excision of lesion of skin	216
S31 Other operations on flap of skin to other site	215
1996–97	
B31 Other plastic operations on breast	1,578
N30 Operations on prepuce	963
B29 Reconstruction of breast	760
B30 Prosthesis for breast	618
E02 Plastic operations on nose	555
S02 Plastic excision of skin of abdominal wall	419
S60 Other operations on skin	337
S48 Insertion of skin expander into subcutaneous tissue	254
B35 Operations on nipple	233
S31 Other operations on flap of skin to other site	209

[1] An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within the year. These figures represent a count of all FCEs where the procedure was mentioned in any of the four operation fields in the HES data set.

Note:

Figures for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are provisional, no adjustments have as yet been made for shortfall in data (i.e. the data are ungrossed). But the data for 1996–97 are grossed for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data.

Source:

Hospital Episode Statistics (DOH)

Diptheria-tetanus Booster Vaccine

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the supplies of diptheria-tetanus booster vaccine will return to the levels of 1997; and what percentage of five-year-olds were vaccinated for diptheria and tetanus immunisation in the last year for which figures are available. [118190]

Yvette Cooper: United Kingdom supplies of diphtheria-tetanus (DT) pre-school booster vaccine have increased year on year since 1996–97 reaching over 890,000 doses in 1998–99. Both manufacturers of the DT vaccine used in the United Kingdom's childhood immunisation programme experienced severe, but different, manufacturing problems during last year which resulted in temporary shortages of this vaccine. The Department has, from the beginning of this year, secured another source of supply for the vaccine and sufficient supplies are now available to allow the levels issued in the previous three years to be reached very shortly.

In 1998–99, the latest year for which figures are available, 512,000 children in England aged under five received reinforcing doses of vaccine against diphtheria and tetanus. This represents about 81 per cent. of the target population of pre-school children for these vaccinations.

Hepatitis C

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the health authorities which currently fund the use of interferon and ribavirin for the treatment of hepatitis C; and what is the estimated cost of offering this nationally; [118196]

(2) what plans he has to create a national standard of care that will be available to all sufferers of hepatitis C. [118195]

Yvette Cooper: Details of individual health authorities' funding policies on particular drugs are not held centrally, but there is currently some inconsistency between health authorities' policies on the combination drug therapy interferon alpha plus ribavirin for the treatment of hepatitis C. We have commissioned the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to consider the use of combination therapy to treat hepatitis C. Their findings are expected in September. They are also looking at evidence-based clinical guidelines for the management of patients with hepatitis C drawn up by the professions with funding from the Department. The recommendations of NICE, and the clinical guidelines, will provide authoritative guidance to healthcare commissioners and clinicians, creating a national standard of care.

The cost of offering combination therapy nationally cannot be estimated with accuracy because of variations such as the length of treatment required. Estimates are between £10 million and £18 million per annum, not including the price of tests and related capital costs.

Adoption

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children from overseas have been adopted by British citizens living in the United Kingdom in each of the last three years. [118378]

Mr. Hutton: The Department does not hold information about the number of children adopted from overseas, only about the number of inter-country adoption applications that it has processed. These will account for the majority of such adoptions and are set out in the table:

Year	*Number of inter-country adoption applications processed by Department*
1997	223
1998	258
1999	277

NHS Appointments

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will end the practice of inviting hon. Members to comment on the shortlists for appointments to chair NHS trusts and health authorities; [118631]

(2) what plans he has to review the role of regional NHS chairmen; [118634]

(3) pursuant to his Department's press release of 22 March on the NHS appointments system, when he will implement his proposal to devolve decisions about local appointments out of the hands of ministers; [118629]

(4) what plans he has to meet the Commissioner for Public Appointments to discuss her report "Public Appointments to NHS Trusts and Health Authorities"; [118632]

(5) what plans he has to commission a fundamental look at the role and purpose of NHS boards and the range of skills and experience required in appointees, in line with the recommendation of the Fritchie report on NHS appointments; [118628]

(6) what steps he has taken to draw up fresh job descriptions and person specifications for chairs and non-executive directors of NHS trusts and health authorities in line with the recommendations of the Fritchie report; [118638]

(7) if he will end the practice of seeking nominations from local authorities for appointments to NHS boards. [118630]

Ms Stuart: We are currently considering the findings and recommendations of the Commissioner's report and a detailed response will be made in due course. We have no plans to meet the Commissioner at present.

Hospital Infections

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the cost per year to the NHS of hospital-acquired infections. [118563]

Yvette Cooper: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) on 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 354W.

Logistics Management

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to pilot the clinical applications for logistics management, developed at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital, in other NHS trusts; and if he will make a statement. [118673]

Yvette Cooper: Ministers welcome and want to encourage examples of good practice in the National Health Service. Systems such as Royal Shrewsbury hospital's Clinical Applications for Logistics Management (CALM) system will be studied further by the new patient access teams set up by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. In addition, work is shortly to be commissioned by the Department on improving bed management.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment the Emergency Services Advisory Team has made of the clinical applications for logistics management used at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital; and if he will make a statement. [118674]

Yvette Cooper: During 1997, the Emergency Services Advisory Team (ESAT) evaluated all bed management systems in the National Health Service, including the Royal Shrewsbury hospital's Clinical Applications for Logistics Management system.

I understand that the report by ESAT published in 1998 commended Royal Shrewsbury hospital's innovative, advanced bed management system.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the clinical applications for logistics management used at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital; and if he will make a statement. [118675]

Yvette Cooper: I am aware that the Clinical Applications for Logistics Management (CALM) system used by Royal Shrewsbury Hospital National Health Service trust was identified as an example of good practice in a National Audit Office report. The system was also awarded beacon status in 1999.

I understand that a visit has been planned by the Department's head of hospital development to the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital in the near future to make a further evaluation of the CALM system.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the number of patients annually who would not have operations cancelled if the clinical applications for logistics management, as used by the Royal Shrewsbury hospital, was implemented nationwide. [118672]

Yvette Cooper: Ministers are aware of the reduction in cancelled operations achieved by the Clinical Applications for Logistics Management (CALM) system at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital. Other National Health Service hospitals operating their own independent decision support systems for effective bed management also claim improvements in lowering the number of cancelled operations.

Successful replication of systems such as CALM depends at least as much on people, knowledge, commitment and local circumstances as on specific technology. Therefore, it is not possible to extrapolate Royal Shrewsbury Hospital's reduced figures for cancelled operations to all other NHS hospitals.

NVQ (Care)

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people who registered for NVQ Level 2 in Care completed and passed the registered course; and what percentage this represented of the number who registered, in the last year for which figures are available; [118635]

(2) how many care assistants have (i) registered for and (ii) completed NVQ Level 2 in Care in *(a)* nursing homes and *(b)* residential homes, in the last year for which figures are available; [118637]

(3) what is the average period taken between registration and completion of NVQ Level 2 in Care. [118636]

Mr. Hutton: Information is not available on numbers of care assistants registering for or completing NVQs by type of care provision. Nor are data available on times of completion for individual candidates.

However, data are available showing that during the 12 month period 1 October 1998 to 30 September 1999, 35,742 candidates were registered for an NVQ Level 2 Care award in the United Kingdom. In the same period, 18,135 candidates received their certificates for this award.

We have been advised by the National Training Organisation for Social Care that research undertaken on the completion of NVQs has shown that the average period taken to complete an NVQ Level 2 in Care is 18 months.

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service Appointments

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is her Government's practice relating to the nationality of personnel who are involved in making appointments to senior positions within the United Kingdom Civil Service; and if he will make a statement. [118092]

Mr. Stringer: Appointments to the Senior Civil Service by open competition are governed by the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code. The Code does not include nationality requirements for personnel involved in making such appointments.

Appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service are a matter for the Northern Ireland Civil Service Commissioners.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117817]

Mr. Morley: My Department employed 44 lawyers as at 31 March 2000. This figure does not include: three lawyers on career break; two lawyers on maternity leave; two lawyers on secondment and three lawyers on loan to other Government Departments.

On 31 March 1995, my Department employed 55 lawyers. This figure does not include two lawyers who were on secondment.

Organic Food

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the demand for organic food in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [118569]

Mr. Morley: We expect the demand for organic produce to be sustained and to that end have made provision for increased expenditure on conversion aid in the England Rural Development Plan.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assistance he will make available to farmers who wish to convert to organic farming before the Organic Farming Scheme reopens. [118576]

Mr. Morley: We are continuing to fund the provision of free conversion advice, including on-farm visits, by the Organic Conversion Information Service.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make new money available to fund organic conversion between now and April 2001. [118575]

Mr. Morley: We are projecting expenditure of £12 million for this financial year on conversion aid in England. I have no plans to increase that figure.

Beef

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps the Government are taking to secure a lifting of the ban on the export of British beef to the EU. [117187]

Ms Quin: British beef can be exported to all member states except France. The European Commission has begun legal proceedings against the French Government for their failure to lift their ban on the import of British beef. The UK Government have made it clear to the Commission that they expect these proceeding to be pursued vigorously.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evidence his Department has collated on the extent to which beef carcases retaining the spinal cord are being imported from other EU countries. [118666]

Ms Quin: Inspections of beef imported from the EU are carried out in all licensed meat plants in the UK. Since January 1998, when the Specified Risk Material Order 1997 came into force requiring imported carcases not to contain any specified risk materials, one of these inspections in mid-1999 has identified seven beef forequarters in a single consignment from which the spinal cord had not been completely removed.

Fishing Quotas

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 588W, if the reallocation of quota involved resulted in a reduction of *(a)* quota and *(b)* resources available to non-foreign-owned vessels; and if he will make a statement. [118019]

Mr. Morley: Vessels which rejoined the UK fleet in the early 1990s, having previously been de-registered as a result of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988, had incomplete track records for the period they had been off the register. To accommodate their return, the non-sector's quota allocations for Western hake and Area VII anglers and megrim for 1992, 1993 and 1994, which reflected fishing activity in a preceding rolling three year reference period, were adjusted as shown in the table.

	Western hake	*Area VII anglers*	*Area VII megrim*
1992			
Pre adjustment	2,578	1,642	485
Post adjustment	3,837	2,361	974
1993			
Pre adjustment	3,228	1,512	833
Post adjustment	3,928	1,707	1,107
1994			
Pre adjustment	3,002	1,548	1,002
Post adjustment	3,193	1,548	1,057

Adjustments in subsequent years have been minimal as most of the vessels concerned had returned to the register by the end of 1994.

TREASURY

Taxation

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the annual revenue raised from tax on bank and building society accounts from accounts taxed at *(a)* the starting rate of tax, *(b)* the basic rate of tax and *(c)* the higher rate of tax in each of the last three years. [117235]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Banks and building societies are required to deduct income tax at the lower rate of 20 per cent. before paying interest to savers. This satisfies the tax liability of lower and basic rate taxpayers. The additional tax liability of higher rate taxpayers (the difference between 20 per cent. and 40 per cent.) is administered through Self Assessment. Estimates for the liabilities are shown in the table. The increase over this period reflects higher deposit levels and interest rates.

Amounts of tax: £ billion

	Tax on interest liable at 20% lower rate	*Excess over 20% lower rate*	*Total tax liability from bank and building society interest*
1996–97	1.8	0.4	2.2
1997–98	2.3	0.5	2.8
1998–99	3.0	0.7	3.7

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for which *(a)* benefits and *(b)* services a successful claim for Working Families Tax Credit is a passport. [117620]

Mr. Timms: The major central Government passports for many Working Families Tax Credit recipients are help with NHS costs such as prescription charges, dental treatment, sight tests and hearing aids and Social Fund payments to help with maternity costs or funeral expenses.

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to the Exchequer in a full year of the Working Families Tax Credit. [117838]

Mr. Timms: The projection for 2000–01 is £4.8 billion. This takes into account (a) the increase in the child tax credit in awards made from June 2000, and (b) the introduction of the disabled child tax credit in awards made from October 2000.

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in Houghton and Washington, East receive the Working Families Tax Credit; and what has been the expenditure on working families tax credit for that area since it was introduced. [117976]

Mr. Timms: It is estimated that 2,200 families in Houghton and Washington, East were awarded the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) by the end of

February 2000. There is insufficient data available to provide a reliable estimate of the total expenditure on these awards.

Car Taxes

Ms Oona King: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what taxes are payable on the purchase of *(a)* new cars imported from other EU member states, *(b)* cars less than six months old imported from other EU member states and *(c)* used cars. [117854]

Mr. Timms: UK VAT at 17.5 per cent. of the purchase price is payable when a private individual purchases a car which is either less than six months old, or has travelled less than 6,000 kms, in another EU member state and brings it to the UK. If the car is more than six months old and has travelled more than 6,000 kms, VAT will be payable in the member state in which the purchase took place. No UK VAT will be payable.

Personal Pension Plans

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many people paid into personal pension plans and how many schemes attracted tax relief at *(a)* the starting rate, *(b)* the standard rate and *(c)* the higher rate in each of the last three years; [117231]

(2) what was the total annual cost to the Treasury of providing tax relief on personal pension plans at *(a)* the starting rate, *(b)* the standard rate and *(c)* the higher rate in each of the last three years. [117230]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Estimates of the cost of tax relief for contributions to personal pensions and such information as is available on the number of contributors by rate of income tax are given in the tables.

	Number
Employees[1] making contributions to personal pensions	Approximately [2]3,000,000
of which, higher rate taxpayers	300,000

[1] Based on aggregate information provided by plan managers and survey data.
[2] All benefit from repayment of basic rate tax claimed by their pension provider, including those who are non-taxpayers or pay tax at less than the basic rate.

Number of self-employed [1] making contributions to personal pensions

Thousand

Rate of income tax	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Non-taxpayers	290	310	280
Lower rate	170	170	160
Basic rate	690	680	660
Higher rate	210	250	260

[1] Based on relief claimed on tax returns

Cost of tax relief for personal pension schemes

£ million

Source of contributions and rate of income tax relief	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Employees' contributions			
Basic rate	480	420	470
Higher Rate	200	390	450
Employers' contributions[1]			
Basic rate	160	180	230
Higher rate	60	170	220

Cost of tax relief for personal pension schemes

£ million

Source of contributions and rate of income tax relief	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
National Insurance rebates[2]			
Basic rate	224	217	175
Contributions by the self employed			
Lower rate	30	30	30
Basic rate	200	210	210
Higher rate	420	500	530

[1] On the basis that under present arrangements, employers' contributions are not taxable as a benefit in kind of the employees. Figures assume that the proportion related to higher rate taxpayers is the same as that observed for employees' contributions.
[2] Basic rate tax relief in respect of the employees' part of the National Insurance rebate received by around 3.7 million employees with appropriate personal pensions.

Medical Insurance

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of medical insurance policies held by the over-60s which have not been renewed since the abolition of tax relief. [117715]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 4 April 2000]:* None. There is no reliable information available to the Government about renewals by the over-60s of their private medical insurance policies for any period since the tax relief was abolished in 1997.

Income Tax Rates

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many taxpayers in 2000–01 he estimates will have a marginal income tax rate of *(a)* 10 per cent., *(b)* 22 per cent. and *(c)* 40 per cent.; what proportion of each of these groups works (i) part-time and (ii) full-time; if he will set out the calculations underlying his answer; and if he will make a statement. [117826]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The table gives the figures requested for 2000–01.

Marginal income tax rate	*Number of taxpayers (million)*	*Percentage working*	
		Full-time [1]	*Part-time* [1]
10 per cent.	2.7	12	56
22 per cent.[2]	22.6	66	12
40 per cent.[3]	2.7	89	5

[1] Those working full-time or part-time include both employees and the self-employed
[2] Includes taxpayers whose marginal rate is the lower rate on savings income or the ordinary dividends rate
[3] Includes taxpayers whose marginal rate is the higher dividends rate

These estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and Family Expenditure Survey and are consistent with the March 2000 Budget.

Industrial and Provident Societies

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what assessment he has made of the responses to

the recent consultation exercise on the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts; and for what reasons the results have not yet been published; [118200]

(2) if, after discussions with the Co-operative Movement are completed, he intends to propose amendments to the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts. [118201]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) on 20 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 446W.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Family Statistics

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many single parents in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980 and *(c)* 1999 were in receipt of social security benefits, excluding child benefit or its equivalent; and what was (i) the cost of such benefits and (ii) the proportion of the total social security budget which they constituted in each of these years. [117534]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Number of claimants

	1970	*1980*	*1999*
Benefit:			
Income Support (Supplementary Benefit in 1970 and 1980)	191,000	316,000	[1]1,030,000
Jobseeker's Allowance (Income based)	n/a	n/a	14,000
Housing Benefit[2]	n/a	n/a	1,016,000
Family Credit (Family Income Supplement in 1971 and 1980)	15,000	52,000	[3]405,000
Widowed Mothers Allowance[4]	100,000	79,000	47,000
Annual cost[5] (£ billion)	1.1	£1.4	9.1
Proportion of DSS budget (percentage)	3	3	9

[1] This is the number of "single Income Support claimants with dependants". Therefore this figure includes some who are claiming Income Support (IS) due to disability or being over pension age as well as those claiming IS due to being a lone parent.
[2] Figures for Housing Benefit are for 1998. The current Housing Benefit scheme was introduced in 1988. Prior to 1988 figures were not collected separately for lone parents and so they have not been included in the table.
[3] Figures for Family Income Supplement are for 1971 and 1980. Figures for Family Credit (FC) only go up to September 1999. From October 1999, FC was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit.
[4] Figures for Widowed Mothers Allowance (WMA) are for December 1971, November 1981 and March 1999.
[5] The expenditure figures are given in real 1999–2000 prices. They are based on 1970–71, 1980–81 and 1999–2000 with the following exceptions: WMA is based on 1971–72 and 1981–82. FIS is based on 1981–82 and FC refers to 1998–99 (ie the last full year of FC). Therefore the proportion of expenditure for 1970–71, 1980–81 and 1999–2000 are approximate figures.

Notes:
1. Estimates of the numbers on benefit are based on 1 per cent. and 5 per cent. scans of benefit computer systems. These scans select 1 per cent. or 5 per cent. of the relevant cases and so are subject to some degree of sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand.
3. Some lone parents will be in receipt of other benefits such as IB, SDA or Industrial Injuries Benefit. We have not included them in this table, as we cannot separately identify lone parents on the computer systems for these benefits.
4. Figures cannot be added together as some cases will be in receipt of more than one of these benefits.

Sources:
1. Income Support: Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1999.
2. Supplementary Benefit: Supplementary Benefit Annual Statistical Enquiries.
3. JSA (IB): Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1999.
4. Family Credit: Family Credit Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 1999.
5. Widowed Mothers Allowance: 5 per cent. sample of Pension Strategy Computer System, March 1999.
6. Housing Benefit: Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample inquiry, taken as at the second Thursday of May 1998.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of households headed by a single mother are currently in receipt of *(a)* housing benefit, *(b)* other social security benefits, excluding child benefit, *(c)* income support, *(d)* social security loans and *(e)* free school meals. [117531]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Percentage

	Proportion of all lone mothers in receipt
Housing Benefit	59
Other Social Security Benefits	28
Income Support	60
Social Fund Loans	24
Free School Meals	[1]—

[1] Information for free school meals is not available by family type.

Notes:

1. Estimates of the numbers on benefit are based on 1 per cent. and 5 per cent. scans of benefit computer systems. These scans select 1 per cent. or 5 per cent. of the relevant cases and so are subject to some degree of sampling error.

2. The proportions have been calculated using departmental forecasts of the number of lone parents. Figures have been rounded to the nearest percentage point.

3. Some lone parents will be in receipt of other benefits such as Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disability Allowance or Industrial Injuries Benefit. We have not included them in this table, as we cannot separately identify lone parents on the computer systems for these benefits. Other benefits is defined to include Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based) (JSA(IB)), Widowed Mothers Allowance and Family Credit (FC).

4. Figures for FC only go up to September 1999. From October 1999, FC was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit.

5. The figures for the Social Fund exclude people with an outstanding loan, which they are not currently repaying.

Sources:
1. Income Support: Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1999.
2. JSA (IB): Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1999.
3. Family Credit: Family Credit Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, August 1999 Widowed Mothers Allowance: 5 per cent. sample of Pension Strategy Computer System, March 1999.
4. Housing Benefit: Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample inquiry, taken as at the second Thursday of May 1998.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many single parent households which were headed by a divorced woman were in receipt of social security benefits, excluding child benefit or its equivalent, in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980 and *(c)* 1999; and what was the cost of such benefits in each of these years. [117533]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested as, generally, statistics on the receipt of Social Security benefits can only be broken down into lone and couple claimants. Divorced claimants are not separately identified.

Such information as is available is as follows. In 1980, of 316,000 lone parents claiming Supplementary Benefit, 109,000 were recorded as being female divorced claimants with dependants. In May 1994, 161,000 female lone parents were divorced (17 per cent. of all female lone parents). Since May 1994 divorced claimants have not been separately identified in Income Support statistics.

Sources:
1. 1994: Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 1994.
2. 1980: Supplementary Benefit Annual Statistical Enquiry.
3. Caseloads have been rounded to the nearest 1,000.

Departmental Officials

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the officials in his Department at Grade 3 and above with responsibility for retirement and widows' pension matters in the period 1986 to 1991. [117694]

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* the officials in his Department at Grade 3 and above with responsibility for retirement and widows' pensions matters in the period 1986 to 1991 and *(b)* the capacities in which they are currently employed in the public service. [118222]

Mr. Darling: The officials in this Department at Grade 3 and above from 1986 to 1991 are a matter of public record in The Civil Service Year Books from 1986 on. These are available in the Library.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the proportion of recipients of letters under his minimum income guarantee take-up campaign who are entitled to income support. [117870]

Mr. Rooker: As part of the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) take-up campaign we will be writing to around 2 million pensioners whom our records suggest are most likely to have underlying entitlement. This targeted group will be pensioners who our pension records suggest have incomes below the MIG level. However, we do not know how many of these pensioners will have capital or other income that could affect their entitlement to benefit.

Pension Payment Methods

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements he is putting in place to ensure that people in receipt of retirement pension paid through automatic credit transfer are paid on the date the pension is due. [118033]

Mr. Rooker: The frequency of payments is one of a number of issues to be considered on the move to payments by Automated Credit Transfer. No final decisions have yet been taken, but we will ensure that the new arrangements from 2003 continue to meet people's needs. In particular, we recognise that many pensioners will expect to be able to continue to be paid weekly.

Mortgage Interest

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions have taken place between his Department and mortgage lenders to ensure that when mortgage interest is paid by the Department the borrower pays interest on the most favourable terms available from the mortgage lender. [118649]

Angela Eagle: There have been no discussions between this Department and mortgage lenders with regard to favourable interest rates. The Department calculates mortgage payments based on a standard interest rate that is calculated by the Building Societies Commission. A mortgage contract is between the lender and the borrower, with no involvement from this Department.

Benefits (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people over the age of 65 do not claim *(a)* a state pension and *(b)* other state benefits in the Crosby constituency. [118682]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available at constituency level. If my hon. Friend has a particular problem perhaps she will write to me.

Widowers' Benefits

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 30 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 272W, on widowers' benefits, for what reason the ex gratia payment was made. [118664]

Angela Eagle: An offer of ex gratia payments was made to a widowed father by way of friendly settlement of his case before the European Court of Human Rights.

Earnings Top-up Pilot

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many workers in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne are receiving benefits under the Earnings Top-Up pilot; what is the value of these benefits; what numbers of *(a)* women and *(b)* men are receiving the top-up; how many of these women and men are working part-time and do not have the care of children; and when the benefit will cease. [117877]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

The three-year Earnings Top-Up pilot began in October 1996 and finished as planned at the end of September this year. No new claims for Earnings Top-Up have been accepted since 28 September 1999. However, people in receipt of Earnings Top-Up at the time the pilot ended are allowed to claim one further six-month award. This means that some people could continue to receive Earnings Top-Up until 25 September 2000.

Earnings top-up (ETU) cases in Newcastle upon Tyne by sex and weekly hours worked as at 31 March 2000

	All cases		Weekly hours worked: Under 30 hours		Weekly hours worked: 30 hours or more	
	Cases	Average ETU (£)	Cases	Average ETU (£)	Cases	Average ETU (£)
All cases	1,781	26.98	1,176	25.36	605	30.13
All women	911	23.44	699	23.35	212	23.76
All men	870	30.68	477	28.30	393	33.57

Notes:
1. As Earnings Top-Up was a pilot of an in-work benefit for people without dependent children no one with the care of children would have been eligible for it. Such families would have been able to claim Working Families Tax Credit.
2. Based on 100 per cent. caseload figures.
3. Figures are unrounded.

Source:
Earnings Top-Up Statistical Enquiry, March 2000.

Primary Carers (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people over the age of 65 were primary carers in the Crosby constituency in each of the years from 1994 to 1997. [118681]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available.

State Pension

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the oral statement by the Minister of State of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 624–25, on the state pension, if he will give a breakdown for the figure of £800 million. [118801]

Mr. Darling: The information is in the table and shows an annual breakdown of the amount spent on Winter Fuel Payments and on earnings-uprating the MIG, over and above what the cost of earnings-uprating the basic state pension would have been.

£ million

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
Winter Fuel Payment (a)	200	200	760	1,380	1,210
MIG (b)	—	—	410	700	1,090
Total (c = a+b)	200	200	1,170	2,080	2,300
RP earnings-uprated since April 1998 (d)	—	130	610	1,580	1,860
Extra spending (c-d)	200	70	560	500	440
Cumulative extra spending	200	270	830	1,330	1,770

Notes:
1. Rounded to the nearest £10 million.
2. Costs are in 1999–2000 terms.
3. Some figures do not appear to sum. This is due to rounding.

Winter Fuel Payments

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will make an announcement about the payment of Winter Fuel Payments following the European Court judgment of 16 December 1999. [118811]

Mr. Darling: Following the European Court of Justice's ruling on Winter Fuel Payments last December, I announced the Government's intention to equalise, at 60, the age at which payments could be made. I also said that it would be necessary to set up a claims process to make sure that the right people got the right amount of Winter Fuel Payment due.

The arrangements are as follows:

We want to ensure that people entitled to payments for past winters will receive those payments as soon as practically possible. The plan is to make them from the end of June onwards and payments for this coming winter before Christmas 2000.

Around 50,000 people, who think they may now be eligible for a backdated payment, have already registered their details with the Department. We will be writing to them in the next few weeks with a claim form for completion.

Over a five week period starting in May, we will also be writing to over two million people, who we think are eligible, to invite them to make a claim. There is no need for anyone to do anything now.

People who think they are eligible will also be able to download claim forms from the Department's own website, www.dss.gov.uk, or they will be able to obtain them, on request, from the Winter Fuel Payment helpline. The helpline number is 08459 15 15 15.

A simultaneous national advertising campaign will be set in train to encourage those who think they are eligible, and who have not received a letter by mid-June, to contact the Department. Also, from June up to Christmas, information and advertising campaigns will be run to help ensure that people are fully aware of how to claim and when they will receive their payments. Arrangements for notifying representative bodies will be set in train so that they will be able to advise those who contact them for advice.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 12 April 2000

DEFENCE

Air Brigades

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what progress has been made in providing increased engineer support to the air manoeuvre brigade; and if he will make a statement; [117489]

(2) what progress has been made in developing the 24 Airmobile Brigade into a high-capability air manoeuvre formation; and if he will make a statement. [117499]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* Sixteen Air Assault Brigade formed on 1 September 1999. It already has three infantry battalions and three aviation regiments under command. It is supported by a dedicated artillery regiment although this will not move from Aldershot to Colchester until at least 2003. The Engineer Regiment to support the Brigade will be formed when barrack facilities have been constructed at Woodbridge in 2003.

In the interim 9 Parachute Squadron RE and 51 Air Assault Squadron will continue to support the Brigade from their current locations—Aldershot and Ripon respectively. The logistic units which support the Brigade are currently reorganising to their new structure and this should be complete by 2002. The Brigade is also preparing to exploit the potential of the Westland Apache helicopter, the first squadron of which is due to be operational in late 2002.

Engineer Regiments

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what progress has been made in the establishment of the sixth close support engineer regiment; and if he will make a statement; [117494]

(2) what progress has been made in forming two new regular engineer squadrons; and if he will make a statement. [117492]

Mr. Spellar: *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* Two new engineer regiments and three new engineer squadrons are to be formed. 26 (Close Support) Engineer Regiment, has started forming and will be operational by October this year. One of its squadrons cannot, however, be formed before 2003, the date on which its accommodation is planned to become available. The Regiment is initially being formed in Horne Barracks, Larkhill, and early next year it will move into modular accommodation in Ludgershall, thereby allowing Horne Barracks to be refurbished for 19 Field Regiment RA. Its long-term location will be Swinton Barracks, Perham Down, but this is not expected to be complete until 2003 at the earliest.

23 Engineer Regiment will support 16 Air Assault Brigade and it will form up in its new location in 2003: its two constituent parts are already supporting the Brigade. The Regiment cannot be formed until barrack facilities have been constructed at Woodbridge in 2003. In the interim 9 Parachute Squadron RE and 51 Air Assault Squadron will continue to support the Brigade from their current locations—Aldershot and Ripon respectively.

The engineer field support squadron is to be formed in April this year, using Gurkha manpower, and this will be operational by September. The first of the two air support engineer squadrons is currently planned to form up in July 2001, and the second in 2003.

HMS Ramsey

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of HMS Ramsey. [117845]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 12 April 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the cost of HMS Ramsey. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The expected Unit Production Cost (UPC) of HMS Ramsey is £29.947M.

Service Accommodation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many houses specifically for junior officers in the Royal Navy are planned to be built, at what cost and in what locations, in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [118063]

Dr. Moonie: During 1999–2000 25 three bedroomed houses were released in a phased handover at Broadwater Park, Ilchester, Yeovil to meet a Royal Navy requirement for junior officers, i.e. Lieutenants and Sub Lieutenants. The accommodation was made available through a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme. The annual charge for this type of property, which includes maintenance to an agreed standard, is commercially sensitive information. I am therefore withholding the information under exemption 7a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

During 2000–01 it is planned that a PFI contract for Bristol, Bath, Portsmouth and Shrivenham will be placed. This will provide 70 officers' houses at Seafield Park, Stubbington (including 15 which will be built using Ministry of Defence capital) to meet a joint RN and RAF requirement. The majority are likely to be allocated to RN families. Firm costs are not yet available and are likely to be commercially sensitive. It is expected that construction will be completed during 2001–02.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of the PFI scheme to build homes for Royal Navy and RAF officers in Stubbington, Hampshire; and if he will make a statement. [118059]

Dr. Moonie: The proposed Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract for Bristol, Bath, Portsmouth and Shrivenham includes the provision of 55 properties at Seafield Park, Fareham (a further 15 properties are to be provided through this contract as a capital build). The PFI element will be for a 25 year period.

These new houses will address a shortage of accommodation for officers in the Portsmouth area, where over 100 officers are currently being housed in short term rented accommodation.

The project is at a final tender stage and estimated prices cannot be released as they are commercially sensitive. I am therefore withholding the information under exemption 7a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

National Missile Defence System

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what inquiries the US Government have made of his Department about possible use of *(a)* Fylingdales, *(b)* Menwith Hill and *(c)* other sites in the UK as part of plans for a US national missile defence system. [118316]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 30 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 209W.

Armoured Regiments

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in re-roling an armoured regiment into an armoured reconnaissance regiment; and if he will make a statement. [117498]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The fourth armoured reconnaissance regiment which will be provided by the Queens Dragoon Guards, currently based in Catterick, will have completed its conversion to its new role by October this year. On current plans, they will move to Bovington in August 2003.

Signals Squadrons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in forming the two new regular signals squadrons; and if he will make a statement. [117491]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* We are in fact forming four new regular signals squadrons. The first of the two signal squadrons dedicated to support the Logistic Brigades has already formed in Aldershot, earlier than the planned date of 2001, and the second is currently planned to form up in Germany in 2003. The first of two additional air support squadrons is due to form by 2003, with the second being formed when sufficient manpower is available. We expect this to be by 2005.

Stabilised Weapon and Reconnaisance Mount

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on introducing the Stabilised Weapon and Reconnaisance Mount into the UK armed services. [117850]

Dr. Moonie: None. The Stabilised Weapon and Reconnaissance Mount is a privately funded venture to develop a stabilised weapon and sensor system. If offered by potential prime contractors as an armament sub-system in proposals to meet the requirements of projects such as the Future Command and Liaison Vehicle, it would be considered in accordance with normal procurement procedures.

AWE Aldermaston

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the experts responsible for assessing the details of tenders submitted by the consortiums applying for the contract to manage AWE Aldermaston. [118513]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The tenders were assessed by Ministry of Defence staff from the Nuclear Weapons area of the Defence Procurement Agency, the Director Nuclear Policy and the Assistant Chief Scientific Adviser (Nuclear) as well as external advisers on legal and commercial matters. Officials from the independent regulators, the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) and the Environment Agency (EA), were also kept fully informed and consulted as necessary throughout the process. I am withholding the names under Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information on the grounds that, given their involvement in high security work, they are potentially vulnerable to the attentions of terrorists, foreign agencies and anti-nuclear groups.

Docking (Military Vessels)

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Rosyth Dockyard and the Forth Estuary are docking places for the military vessels of the UK's NATO allies. [118644]

Mr. Spellar: MOD no longer owns either docking or berthing facilities in Rosyth. If NATO ships wished to dock in the former Naval Dockyard it would be by arrangement with the relevant commercial company. NATO warships regularly visit Leith and NATO Auxiliary vessels occasionally berth at Defence Munitions Crombie.

Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency for 2000–01. [119122]

Mr. Spellar: The Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency (AFPAA) for the financial year 2000–01. The Targets build upon progress made by the Agency since it formed on 1 April 1997 and are as follows:

Pay, Allowances and Pensions Payments

While making 100 per cent. of payments of pay, allowances and pensions by the due date, the number of errors per 1,000 payments not to exceed 2.5 for pay and allowances and 2.0 for pensions.

Currency of Personnel Records and Liabilities DATA

Update all time-critical records within two days from receipt of valid input.

Responsiveness

Resolve 93 per cent. of inquiries, including written and official help desk responses, within 10 working days of receipt, across all Services where information and/or authorities is within AFPAA control.

Efficiency

To reduce the average unit costs to deliver AFPAA services by 3 per cent. this year.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Doorkeepers

Angela Smith: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what is the average number of hours worked per week by full-time House of Commons Doorkeepers when the House is sitting. [118203]

Mr. Kirkwood: During the first three months of this year Doorkeepers have worked an average of 42½ hours in weeks when the House sat.

Parking Facilities

Mr. Sanders: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make it his policy to charge a market rate on Members' parking facilities; and if he will make a statement. [118103]

Mr. Kirkwood: The Commission has no plans at present to introduce a market charge on Members' parking facilities. However, the Greater London Authority Act 1999 will allow the Authority or the London Borough of Westminster to introduce a licensing scheme for parking in the Palace of Westminster, under which they may levy a charge on the two Houses. The Commission will consider the matter if and when either authority makes proposals for a licensing scheme.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

EU-Africa Summit

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with her European counterparts concerning the agenda of the EU-Africa Summit. [118048]

Clare Short: As Presidency of the EU, Portugal was responsible for co-ordinating preparations for the EU-Africa Summit. I discussed the Summit with the Portuguese Minister for Development when I met him on 11 January. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development also attended an informal meeting of EU Development Ministers on 28–29 January where discussion focused on the role of Europe in promoting peace, security, democracy and development in Africa.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement concerning her engagements at the time of the EU-Africa Summit in Cairo. [118051]

Clare Short: During the Africa-Europe Summit in Cairo on 3–4 April 2000, I was engaged in Government business. The UK Government were represented by the Foreign Secretary.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress made on development at the EU-Africa Summit. [118049]

Clare Short: The Africa-Europe Summit, Cairo 3–4 April 2000, was the first of its kind. African and European Heads of State and Government sat together to discuss key issues of mutual concern, including development issues.

The major issues brought to the table were debt, integrating Africa into the world economy, conflict prevention, human rights and democracy, and poverty eradication. Discussions were frank and constructive.

Follow-up procedures have been agreed including another summit in Europe in 2003. Meetings of Ministers in between the summits and the establishment of a bi-regional group at the senior official level, to meet regularly, will continue work on the issues discussed. In particular, the bi-regional groups of officials will report to Ministers on Africa's debt and the return of cultural property to its country of origin before the next Summit.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development why she did not attend the EU-Africa summit in Cairo. [118052]

Clare Short: The Foreign Secretary led the UK delegation at the Africa-Europe Summit. He was fully briefed by my Department and supported at senior official level. I did not consider it appropriate or necessary for me to attend the summit. The same view was taken by many of my development Minister colleagues.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what briefing her Department provided for the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs concerning the development aspects of the EU-Africa Summit. [118050]

Clare Short: My Department provided comprehensive briefing on development issues discussed at the Africa-Europe Summit, including regional integration within Africa, transfer of technology, debt, poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS, health and the environment. DFID and other Government Departments worked together to prepare briefs on trade, conflict prevention and human rights. In addition, DFID produced and circulated a press briefing on UK Support to Africa for the Summit, covering key aspects of the UK development programme.

Mongolia

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has for changes in the level of aid to Mongolia. [118043]

Clare Short: Most UK aid to Mongolia will continue to be channelled through multilateral agencies. The UK contributes around £5.7 million per year through these channels and this figure is set to rise slightly over the next two to three years.

We will also continue to offer opportunities for civil society organisations to obtain funding for poverty-focused work in Mongolia. We will continue support (at a slightly decreased level) for the Small Grants Scheme administered by the British Embassy in Ulaanbaatar.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on current British aid to Mongolia. [118046]

Clare Short: Most UK aid to Mongolia is channelled through multilateral agencies. Britain contributes around £5.7 million each year through these agencies.

We also support UK Non Governmental Organisations' work in Mongolia and operate a Small Grants Scheme, administered by our Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, focusing on activities which benefit the poorest.

In response to the current severe weather crisis, Britain is also contributing to the purchase of essential humanitarian relief supplies in Mongolia. To date the UK Government have contributed £200,000 to the relief effort.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received from the international community concerning aid to Mongolia. [118044]

Clare Short: My Department has received recent representations from the Government of Mongolia, from the Mongolian Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the United Nations and World Vision concerning aid to Mongolia. These representations have related to requests for assistance regarding the current humanitarian situation following Mongolia's recent extreme winter weather conditions.

Horn of Africa

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the drought in the Horn of Africa; and what recent representations she has received from the international community concerning that drought. [118041]

Clare Short: The United Nations estimate that more than 12 million people face serious food shortages in the Horn of Africa. This is the result of the failure of the rains or very low rainfall in the past three years coupled with ongoing armed conflicts in the region and the presence of large numbers of refugees and displaced persons. The UN launched an appeal for £190 million on 28 January. The UN Secretary General has now appointed Catherine Bertini, Head of the World Food Programme, as his Special Envoy on the drought in the Horn of Africa. She will visit the region 11–19 April.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has for changes in the level of aid to the Horn of Africa region. [118039]

Clare Short: We have established a planning figure of about £23.35 million for bilateral expenditure in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan in 2000–01 compared to an expected outturn of £13.35 million for 1999–2000. This increase was programmed earlier this year following advance warning of the deteriorating food security situation in the Horn of Africa. The funds are available to support development programmes and emergency interventions. Actual expenditure for individual countries like all other planning figures are likely to vary depending on needs. In addition, the EU and other multilateral organisations to which we provide substantial support will be providing assistance to the region.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to increase the amount of immediate food relief to Ethiopia; and if she will make a statement. [118363]

Clare Short: Since January we have committed some £4.5 million including 16,500 metric tonnes of food to help vulnerable populations in Ethiopia. About £2 million of this has been committed in the last week for food and non-food assistance to help provide relief to vulnerable people in Borana and North Omo. The food is being provided through international non-governmental organisations. We will also contribute 17 per cent. of the 432,000 metric tonnes provided by the EC this year.

We are ready to do more as needs emerge.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has made to EU Commissioner Poul Neilson over the suspension of aid to Zimbabwe. [118055]

Clare Short: I have made no direct representations to Mr. Neilson on Zimbabwe. At the General Affairs Council on Monday 10 April the Foreign Secretary, on behalf of the Government, said we could support the initiation of consultations under the Lomé Convention between the European Community and the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries on co-operation with Zimbabwe. My Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office remain in close touch with the European Commission in Brussels and in Harare.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with the Zimbabwean Government concerning the future of the bilateral aid budget. [118054]

Clare Short: I have had no recent discussions with the Zimbabwean Government. Our position on development assistance has been made clear in correspondence and through our High Commissioner and development office in Harare.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list recipient organisations and the amounts they have received from *(a)* British Government sources and *(b)* EU sources in aid related to infrastructure repair projects in Kosovo since 12 June 1999. [118251]

Clare Short: We have provided £10 million towards the cost of repairing the electricity distribution network. Our aim has been to help the local authorities and where appropriate other donors with the supply of equipment and technical advice on the electrical distribution system throughout Kosovo. We have provided £2 million to the water sector, which has included specific repairs to pumping stations. We have also supplied infrastructure equipment to allow the water companies to carry out essential repairs. In addition we have provided £250,000 for the replacement of 5,000 household water pumps through Action Against Hunger. We have also provided assistance to repair and rehabilitate the Pristina district heating system (£0.1 million).

One component of our support to UNMIK has been to provide £700,000 for the rehabilitation of Ishtok prison and £200,000 for the refurbishment of court buildings. Both these projects have been implemented by local contractors. As part of our programme of restarting

essential services in Pristina University Hospital, we have provided £3 million to our IEU to carry out extensive repair and rehabilitation of the hospital infrastructure, services and systems.

In addition, DFID has committed up to £3 million to a programme of emergency works at Pristina International Airport to enable it to operate 24 hour civilian air operations at ICAO Category One standard. This project is being managed by Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick Ltd. and implemented by a combination of both international and local contractors. We have also funded GOAL with £300,000 to provide emergency winter shelter.

Locally our Field Office in Pristina has provided £6 million for 300 Quick Impact Projects which have included community infrastructure repair projects such as schools and health clinics, as well as help to small enterprises. These projects have been implemented by a number of different organisations including the UK military and local NGOs.

Figures for EU support could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Coal Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations his Department has received from *(a)* general practitioners and *(b)* health authorities in respect of the disclosure of patient records relative to coal miners' compensation claims for (i) bronchitis and (ii) emphysema/chronic respiratory disease. [118499]

Mrs. Liddell: Some GPs and hospitals have been uncertain about releasing miners' medical records because they were not clear about the legal basis on which records are being sought and their own obligations. The Department has been in close consultation with the Department of Health and the BMA to enlist the help of medical record holders to ensure prompt release of records. The Department has agreed with both these bodies a statement on the legal basis for disclosure and the operational arrangements for access and copying, including the payment of appropriate fees to the record holders. On this basis, the NHS Executive has issued guidance to NHS Trusts and Health Authorities, and the BMA has also issued guidance to GPs. Both have stressed the vital part that hospitals and GPs play in assisting the compensation process. I understand that the guidance is already helping to speed up the records collection exercise, and I very much welcome the co-operation which the medical profession is showing.

Nuclear Safety

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a copy of the International Atomic Energy Agency report GOV/1998/30, dated 29 May 1998. [118525]

Dr. Howells: The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) document GOV/1998/30 contains the text of the Protocol additional to the Agreement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the European Atomic Energy Community and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

A copy of the protocol was laid before the House on 31 March 1999 as Misc. No.21. Command paper 4282 refers.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals to strengthen international nuclear safeguards Her Majesty's Government will put to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty Conference in April. [118497]

Dr. Howells: The UK delegation will call for all States which have not yet done so to sign and bring into force safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in accordance with their obligations under Article III on the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The UK delegation will also call for all States which have not yet done so to negotiate, sign and bring into force as soon as possible a protocol additional to their existing safeguards agreement with the IAEA. These protocols will be based on the Model Protocol agreed by the Board of Governors of the IAEA in 1997. The UK delegation will point to the Additional Protocol signed by the United Kingdom, the IAEA and the European Atomic Energy Community on 22 September 1998, and to the progress of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill [*Lords*], which contains the legislation necessary to allow entry into force of the Additional Protocol, as proof of our commitment to this process, which is designed to strengthen the existing safeguards regime.

Rover

Sir David Madel: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Task Force he has set up following the BMW decision on Rover will visit the supplier plants to Rover wherever they are in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [118204]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The Task Force set up by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is to assess the impact on the supplier chain, and has created a Supplier Chain Sub-Group that is lead by Grahame Broome of SMMT. The sub-group will not undertake an extensive programme of visits but is working with consultants Deloitte Touche to reach as wide a range of suppliers as possible. So far, it has devised and sent out nearly 6,700 questionnaires to businesses in Rover's supplier chain. The questionnaire is also available on an internet site and businesses are being encouraged to e-mail their responses.

More than 300 replies have been received so far and are being analysed to inform the Task Force's work on producing proposals that will support component

manufacturers, develop their employees, strengthen their competitiveness and assist their efforts to diversify into new sectors.

Post Offices (Shropshire)

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for each constituency in Shropshire the post office branches, indicating those which serve rural communities, which *(a)* closed and *(b)* opened (i) between 1979 to 1997 and (b) since May 1997. [118539]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that as of October 1999, the numbers of post offices in each of the four parliamentary constituencies in Shropshire were as follows:

Post Offices	*Numbers*
Shropshire North	44
Shrewsbury and Atcham	42
Ludlow	45
The Wrekin	25

The Post Office does not hold historical data by constituency for the numbers of post offices which have closed or opened, nor do they hold details by constituency of rural post offices.

Trade Unions

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the minimum membership of a trade union before it can be registered with the Certification Office for Trade Unions and Employer Associations. [118742]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* There is no explicit minimum set by statute. The statutory definition of a trade union is given in section 1 of the Treaty Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. The Certification Officer has to be satisfied that an organisation meets this definition before listing it as a trade union.

Redundancy Regulations

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consideration he has given under the provisions of the Redundancy Payments Regulations 1965 to advice from the Government Actuaries Department in the case of Robert Fletchers (Greenfield) *v.* Peter Blakeman. [118892]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has considered whether or not the Melton Medes (Fletchers) Fund meets the requirements of Regulation 3 of the Redundancy Payments Pensions Regulations 1965 and, having had regard to advice from the Government Actuary's Department, is satisfied that it does.

Export Credit Guarantees (Zimbabwe)

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the ECGD funding for contracts relating to Zimbabwe since May 1997. [118750]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* ECGD provides unconditional repayment guarantees for the provision of export finance made available by commercial banks. Since May 1997, ECGD has guaranteed the following contracts:

£ million

Contracts	*Value*
Mobile Phone System	15
Refurbishment of Bulawayo Power Station	6
Sawmill	3
Land Rovers	24
Mobile telecommunications equipment	6

Prototype Fast Reactor Fuels

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) of 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 534W, on PFR fuels, if he will publish a list of those whom he considers to have an interest and are being consulted. [118809]

Mrs. Liddell: The groups of organisations and individuals listed have already been sent copies of the consultation paper on options for managing the fuels from Dounreay's Prototype Fast Reactor (issued 6 April). As the list shows, we recognise that a wide range of people will have an interest in this consultation, particularly in the Dounreay areas. We are interested in all informed responses on the issue; the consultation paper is available on the DTI's web site at: www.dti.gov.uk/energy/pfrfuel and further paper copies can be obtained from the Department of Trade and Industry, Bay 114, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0ET

Dounreay local MPs and MSPs and Scottish MEPs

Chairmen and Clerks for the relevant Westminster Select Committees

Convenors and Clerks for relevant Scottish Parliament Committees

Regulators and Advisory Bodies

Local Councils

Relevant Government Departments and Scottish Executive

Environmental pressure groups

Trade Unions represented at the site

Other local organisations and individuals

Nuclear industry organisations.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) of 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 534W, on PFR fuels, what criteria are applied to determine who has an interest in the options for managing the prototype fast reactor fuels at Dounreay. [118808]

Mrs. Liddell: We recognise that a wide range of people will have an interest in this issue—particularly, but not exclusively, those in the Dounreay area—and the consultation on the options for managing Dounreay's PFR fuels is open to all. A wide range of people have already been sent the consultation paper; the documents are presented on the DTI's website and further paper copies are available from the Department. We are also seeking the views of all relevant advisory bodies on this issue.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Broadcasting

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of repeater stations will be digitalised; and where they will be located. [118615]

Janet Anderson: The current digital terrestrial television (DTT) transmission plan comprises 81 transmitter sites of which 30 are relay stations. Details of these stations have already been placed on CD-ROM in the Libraries of both Houses. No decisions have been taken as to the number or location of any additional relays to be incorporated into the DTT transmission plan.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what provisions will be made for television viewers in the non-digitalised catchment areas when the analogue system is phased out. [118616]

Janet Anderson: Before analogue switch-over takes place, all viewers who currently receive the main free to air channels must be able to receive these channels digitally. We will be looking carefully at all the options for delivering digital services to the home to ensure that this condition is met.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the analogue switch-off will be permitted. [118617]

Janet Anderson: The analogue signal will be fully switched to digital when the three tests which the Government have set—relating to availability, affordability and take-up—have been met. Under the availability test, all viewers who can receive analogue television now (99.4 per cent.) must be able to receive the main free-to-air channels digitally; under the take-up test, 95 per cent. of consumers must have a digital receiver in the home; and under the affordability test the switch to digital must be within reach of people on low or fixed incomes. The Government expect the tests to be met between 2006 and 2010.

National Athletics Stadium

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the cost of developing an athletics facility to host the 2005 World Athletics Championships at Picketts Lock, Enfield. [118116]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* My Department has made no estimate of such costs. UK Athletics and Sport England have submitted a range of costs for differing proposals for constructing a stadium and are now discussing the optimum solution for the Picketts Lock site.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what proportion of the estimated cost of the development of the national athletics stadium at Picketts Lock he expects to come from public funds; [118417]

(2) what his policy is on public support for the management and running costs of the national athletics stadium at Picketts Lock; and if he will make a statement. [118421]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The extent of public funding or support for any stadium at Picketts Lock has yet to be determined as UK Athletics have yet to develop a detailed proposal for the site.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if it is his policy that all seats at the national athletics stadium at Picketts Lock should have a minimum width of 500 mm and a minimum seating row depth of 760 mm; and if he will make a statement; [118423]

(2) what his estimate is of the cost of increasing the capacity at the planned national athletics stadium at Picketts Lock to 80,000 in the event of a successful London Olympic bid; [118422]

(3) if it is his policy that all seats at the national athletics stadium at Picketts Lock should have a 'c' value of at least 60 mm based on a focal point on the outside edge of the outside lane around the bends; and if he will make a statement. [118420]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* UK Athletics is to be congratulated on securing the 2005 World Athletics Championships for London following its selection of Picketts Lock as its preferred stadium site. UK Athletics is now starting the process of drawing up detailed proposals for developing the site. The design of the stadium, its cost, funding and long term usage are matters for UK Athletics to determine in consultation, as necessary, with Sport England.

Trafalgar Square

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will make the decision on a permanent work for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. [118035]

Mr. Chris Smith: The advisory panel set up under the Chairmanship of Sir John Mortimer to consider the future of the vacant plinth in Trafalgar Square is due to inform me of its recommendations in May, and I intend to publish their report as soon as possible after I have received it.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with Sir John Mortimer and his Committee on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. [118034]

Mr. Chris Smith: I joined Sir John Mortimer and some members of his advisory group at their inaugural meeting in June 1999. I have had no further discussions with the group about the fourth plinth. I recently met Sir John Mortimer informally on 7 April to discuss progress and I expect to be informed of the group's recommendations in May.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117816]

Mr. Chris Smith: No lawyers are employed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Legal services are provided through an agreement between the Department and the Treasury Solicitor's Department.

Five lawyers at the Treasury Solicitor's Department were allocated to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as at 31 March 2000 and four were allocated to the Department for National Heritage in 1995.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the increase in the Working Families Tax Credit on families in Northern Ireland. [117429]

Mr. Timms: 30,722 families in Northern Ireland had been awarded the Working Families Tax Credit by the end of February 2000. In addition, 4,351 families were still on Family Credit at that date. The sum of these two figures is more than 5,000 higher than the number of Northern Ireland families with Family Credit awards current at August 1999.

For the United Kingdom as a whole it is expected that families will get £24 per week more on average under the Working Families Tax Credit than under Family Credit. This includes families who would not have qualified for Family Credit.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families are receiving Working Families Tax Credit in Northern Ireland; of these how many he estimates are farming families; and what percentage of farming families in Northern Ireland this represents. [116358]

Mr. Timms: 30,722 families in Northern Ireland had been awarded the Working Families Tax Credit by the end of February 2000. Of these, 1,149 were awards to families where the main earner was classified to the Standard Occupation Code "Farmer". It is not known how many families with children in Northern Ireland have a farmer as their main earner.

Tax Credits

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the differences are between administration targets for the handling of tax credit related claims in respect of *(a)* working families and *(b)* disabled people. [118011]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The targets adopted by the Tax Credit Office for handling applications for Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Person's Tax Credit for the period from 1 October 1999 to 31 March 2000 were the ones which the Benefits Agency had agreed for Family Credit and Disability Working Allowance respectively for the period from 1 April to 30 September 1999. The targets were:

Working Families Tax Credit

to clear 90 per cent. of express applications (those from employees making their first application) within five working days

to clear 95 per cent. of non-express applications within 42 working days (and 60 per cent. within 13 working days)

to process 91 per cent. of all applications accurately.

Disabled Person's Tax Credit

to clear 90 per cent. of applications within 43 working days (60 per cent. within 17 working days)

to process 94 per cent. of all applications accurately.

My hon. Friend the Paymaster General is currently discussing with the Inland Revenue all targets for the year 2000–01.

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will disaggregate by income decile the number of families claiming the child care component of the Working Families Tax Credit; [117502]

(2) if he will disaggregate by income decile the number of people in receipt of each tax credit since its introduction. [117503]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The two tax credits introduced to date are the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and the Disabled Person's Tax Credit (DPTC). Insufficient data on income are provided by applicants for these tax credits to allocate them between decile groups of income as conventionally defined for such analyses. Also, household survey data available for analysis do not yet cover families receiving the tax credits. So it is not yet possible to provide the requested analysis for recipients of the tax credits.

Smuggling

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many customs officers were employed on anti-smuggling activities in each of the past 10 years. [117549]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The total number of Customs officers (in terms of staff years) allocated to frontier anti-smuggling work in the last 10 years, and planned for the next three years, is as follows:

Year	*Number*
2002–03	2,676
2001–02	2,576
2000–01	2,449
1999–2000	2,281
1998–99	2,263
1997–98	2,288
1996–97	2,288
1995–96	2,580
1994–95	2,715
1993–94	2,895
1992–93	2,895
1991–92	3,082
1990–91	3,082

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117806]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Legal advice to the Treasury is provided by the Treasury Legal Advisers' Team of the Treasury Solicitor's Department. These lawyers are employed by the Treasury Solicitor's Department and then allocated to the Treasury. There were 14 legal advisers allocated to the Treasury on 1 April 1995 and

18 on 1 April 2000. Although allocated to the Treasury, these advisers also provide some advice to other Departments.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what import duty and tax is paid on imported Beta Interferon. [118528]

Mr. Timms: All drugs and medicines are subject to VAT at 17½ per cent. on importation. This product is free of customs duty at importation.

Where imported drugs and medicines are subsequently dispensed to patients on prescription, the zero-rate of VAT applies.

VAT (Low-emissivity Glass)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will cut the rate of VAT on low-emissivity glass; and if he will make a statement. [118413]

Mr. Timms: The Government introduced a reduced rate for the installation of energy saving materials in all homes in the Budget. The reduced rate applies only to the installation of certain materials whose primary purpose is to save energy. Low-emissivity glass increases the energy efficiency of windows, but that feature is incidental to its main purpose.

Budget Calculations

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what rate of inflation he used when calculating the increase in petrol duty, and VAT, announced in his recent Budget statement. [118746]

Dawn Primarolo: The methodology for calculating the changes in taxes to take account of inflation is set out in Appendix A1 in the Financial Statement and Budget Report.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which measures announced in the Budget statement were based on a forecast inflation rate. [118748]

Dawn Primarolo: The details of how the tax base is indexed to take account of inflation, and when a forecast is used, is set out in Appendix A1 in the Financial Statement and Budget Report.

Climate Change Levy

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the cost would be of extending the 80 per cent. discount on the climate change levy to horticulture for the financial year 2000–01. [118584]

Mr. Timms: As announced in Budget 1999, the Government intend to bring forward legislation in the Finance Bill 2000 to introduce a climate change levy with effect from April 2001. The levy will not be applied in the financial year 2000–01.

Employment Statistics

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates he has made of the number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women in (i) full-time and (ii) part-time work who are aged (1) over 90, (2) 85 to 90, (3) 80 to 85, (4) 75 to 80, (5) 70 to 75 and (6) 65 to 70 years. [118648]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Gordon Prentice, dated 12 April 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent question on people of various age groups who are in employment. I am replying in the Director's absence.

The attached table shows non-seasonally adjusted estimates from the Labour Force (LFS) which is the main source of labour market data on individuals. It gives the average number of men and women in full or part-time employment by age group between winter (December to February) 1998/9 and autumn (September to November) 1999.

The estimates for groups over 80 years of age have been combined in the table as those for the individual age groups requested proved to be statistically unreliable.

People aged 16 or over are classed as in employment by the LFS if they have done at least one hour of paid work (as an employee or self-employed) in the week prior to their LFS interview of if they have a job that they are temporarily away from. People who do unpaid work in a family business and people on Government-supported training and employment programmes are also included according to the International Labour Organisation convention.

People in employment (working full or part-time by age and gender) UK, annual average, winter 1998–99 to autumn 1999

Thousand

Age group	*All in employment* [1]	*In full-time employment*	*In part-time employment*
Men			
65–69	180	69	111
70–74	68	17	51
75–79	24	[2]—	20
80 or over	10	[2]—	9
Women			
65–69	112	12	99
70–74	36	[2]—	32
75–79	13	[2]—	12
80 or over	6	[2]—	[2]—

[1] Includes people who did not state whether they work full or part-time.
[2] Sample size too small for reliable estimate.
Source:
Labour Force Survey, ONS

Retail Prices Index

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what work has been carried out by the Office for National Statistics to construct a retail prices index reflecting a representative basket of goods and services used by *(a)* pensioners and *(b)* recipients of income support; and how such an index would differ from the overall index. [118036]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Kidgell to Dr. Vincent Cable, dated 12 April 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent question on work carried out by the ONS on a retail price index reflecting goods and services used by pensioners and recipients of income support. I am replying in the Director's absence.

Each quarter the ONS publishes in the Consumer Price Indices Business Monitor (MM23) separate indices for one and two pensioner households, using weights derived from relevant expenditure information from the Family Expenditure Survey (FES). These indices exclude a number of items in the Retail Prices Index (RPI), including charges for NHS services, all housing costs and staff restaurant meals. NHS charges are excluded because they are generally not paid by pensioners, and housing costs are excluded because pensioners are mostly cushioned from rises by the receipt of rebates. Pensioners do not have staff restaurant meals. For rail and bus fares, special pensioners rail and bus fare indices are substituted for the normal index household indices to allow for fare concessions available in some areas.

Between January 1987, the latest reference period for the RPI, and the fourth quarter of 1999, the RPI increased by 66.8%. In the same period, the one-person pensioner household index increased by 50.1% and the two-person pensioner household index increased by 54.9%.

The ONS does not construct a separate index for recipients of income support, but does construct the Rossi index each month. This is used for uprating state income-related benefits once a year. The Rossi index is the all items RPI excluding mortgage interest payments, rent, council tax and owner-occupiers' depreciation costs. This is not published, but is made available on request to the ONS.

Between January 1987 and December 1999, the RPI increased by 67.3%. In the same period, the Rossi index increased by 61.8%.

New Zealand Investment Exchanges

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what New Zealand investment exchanges have been recognised this year as overseas investment exchanges in the UK under sections 37 and 40 of the Financial Services Act 1986. [118941]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The New Zealand Futures and Options Exchange Ltd. (NZFOE) has been granted recognition as an Overseas Investment Exchange as of today, having satisfied the conditions under sections 37 and 40 of the Financial Services Act 1986. NZFOE is therefore able to carry out investment business in the UK.

Better Government for Older People

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress his Department has made, pursuant to the Better Government for Older People programme to provide access for older people to computer training and Internet services in *(a)* Staffordshire and *(b)* England. [118395]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have been asked to reply.

The Better Government for Older People programme's pilot phase has just come to an end. The 28 local authority-led pilot projects have addressed a very wide range of issues affecting older people, including access to computers and the Internet. A report evaluating the programme and making a number of recommendations for future action is expected to be published in June. The Government hope to respond by the end of the year.

Staffordshire is not one of the 28 pilot areas but the report will make recommendations applicable to the whole of the UK. The county council has joined the Better Government for Older People Network, the forum in which the pilot projects' experience is shared and discussed with other local authorities, voluntary organisations and older people and which offers access to a programme of seminars, conferences and support. The Minister of State, Department of Social Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), who chairs the Inter-Ministerial Group on Older People, spoke at a BGOP Network event on New Technology in Public Services on 10 April. ICL sponsors the Network and projects in Bolton, Newcastle, Harrow, Devon, Middlesbrough and Lanarkshire.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Marginal Deduction Rates

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many households faced marginal deduction rates from employment of less than 16 hours a week that exceeded *(a)* 80 per cent., *(b)* 90 per cent. and *(c)* 100 per cent. (i) before the 1998 Budget, (ii) before the 1999 Budget, (iii) before the 2000 Budget and (iv) after the 2000 Budget; and if he will make a statement. [118732]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available.

Benefits (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people are in receipt of child benefit allowance in the Crosby constituency; and what percentage they constitute of the total population of the constituency. [118686]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Child Benefit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas, dated 11 April 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people are in receipt of child benefit allowance in the Crosby constituency; and what percentage they constitute of the total population of the constituency.

As of 28 February 1999, the number of households receiving child benefit in the Crosby constituency was approximately 9,000. This data is based on a 5 per cent. sample of child benefit records and has been derived from the information available in that sample based on residential postcodes.

Due to the insufficient postcode data supplied to Analytical Services Division from the child benefit computer system, it has been difficult to derive accurate statistics by constituency. The Department is however, attempting to resolve this issue by improving the quality and accuracy of the postcode data and will make this information available as soon as this is achieved.

Population data for Crosby is also not available in the format requested. The Office of National Statistics have advised that the 1991 census survey is based on Enumeration District information and are unable to match this to constituencies.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in the age bands *(a)* 18 to 25, *(b)* 25 to 40, *(c)* 40 to 55 and *(d)* 55 to 65 years were in receipt of (i) Disability Allowance, (ii) Invalid Care Allowance, (iii) Carers Allowance, (iv) Incapacity Benefit and (v) other health-related benefit in (A) absolute

numbers and (B) as a percentage of the total population of the Crosby constituency in each of the years 1994 to 1999. [118684]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas, dated 11 April 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking about people in receipt of certain benefits in your constituency.

Information is not available for all the relevant benefits in the format requested. Unfortunately, population figures are not available for the Crosby constituency and I cannot, therefore, express any figures as a percentage of the population.

Prior to 1998, figures for recipients of Disability Living Allowance were based on a 5% sample and the numbers for the Crosby constituency are too small to be statistically reliable. However, since 1998, the figures are based on a 100% sample and the details for 1998 and 1999 are set out below.

	18–24	*25–39*	*40–54*	*55–65*
1998	82	417	734	939
1999	81	389	744	944

The figures for Severe Disablement Allowance cannot be provided as the sample is too small to be statistically valid and the figures for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit cannot be provided as they are not available by Parliamentary constituency.

Figures for Invalid Care Allowance are not available by Parliamentary Constituency.

The only other benefit paid specifically for carers is the Income Support Carers Premium. Figures by Parliamentary constituency has only been available since 1998 but the numbers in the 5% sample are too small to be statistically valid.

For Incapacity Benefit, it is not possible to break down the age bands, as the 5% sample is too small to be statistically valid. I have provided below the total figure for the age band 18–65 for the years 1995–1999.

Year	*Number*
1995	2,800
1996	2,500
1997	2,700
1998	2,400
1999	2,000

This reply covers all the sickness, disability and carer benefits.

I hope this is helpful.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people over the age of 65 were in receipt of a benefit other than a state pension in the Crosby constituency in each of the years from 1994 to 1999. [118683]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas, dated 11 April 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people over the age of 65 were in receipt of a benefit other than a state pension in the Crosby constituency in each of the years from 1994 to 1999.

Some of the many benefits available to people over the age of 65 are not administered by the Benefits Agency, for example, Housing Benefit, Free Prescriptions, Travel Passes, etc.

I can provide the following information for those benefits that the Benefits Agency is responsible for delivering.

For Attendance Allowance (AA) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA), the figures for Crosby constituency are as follows:

Year	*AA*	*DLA*
1994	[1]—	700
1995	2,000	700
1996	1,700	700
1997	1,900	700
1998	2,175	600
1999	2,212	661

[1] Sample too small to be statistically valid

Notes:

1. Figures up to 1997 based on a 5 per cent. sample
2. Figures from 1998 based on a 100 per cent. sample

For Income Support, the information is only available by parliamentary constituency from 1998. The estimated numbers in the constituency of Crosby in receipt of Income Support over the age of 65 are:

Year	
1998	1,800
1999	1,900

For other benefits provided through the Benefits Agency for which people over age 65 may be eligible (see list below), the information is either not available by Parliamentary constituency, or the sample is too small to be statistically valid.

Industrial Injuries Scheme Benefits

Incapacity Benefit

Severe Disablement Allowance

Winter Fuel Payments

Cold Weather Payments

Social Fund Payments

I hope this is helpful.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to reduce processing times for Disability Living Allowance claims. [118519]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Andrew George, dated 11 April 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking about the plans to reduce processing times for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) claims.

We have been experiencing delays recently in the processing of DLA claims. We recognise that this situation is not acceptable and that ensuring the efficient and timely processing of claims is a priority. We are taking action to address the problems currently being experienced.

To reduce delays, we have moved staff from other, less critical areas, of our business and we have set up a special team to identify further process improvements. We are also taking action to reduce variations in performance between different processing units.

I hope this is helpful.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will ensure that pensioners receiving Minimum Income Guarantee do not have deductions made for repayment of loans from the Social Fund; and if he will make a statement. [118335]

Angela Eagle: Interest-free budgeting loans from the Social Fund, designed to spread the cost of routine lump-sum expenses over a longer period, are available to a wide variety of groups receiving Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. People who take out such loans, including pensioners receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, are choosing to use some of their income to pay them back, by deductions from benefit, in the same way that they organise and manage their income to meet other weekly outgoings. It would not be fair or appropriate to exempt any one group from this straightforward repayment arrangement.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are being targeted as possible qualifiers for the Minimum Income Guarantee in each of the age groups *(a)* 60 to 65, *(b)* 65 to 70, *(c)* 70 to 75, *(d)* 75 to 80, *(e)* 80 to 85, *(f)* 85 to 90 and *(g)* over 90 years old. [118007]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Pensioners in the following age bands are being targeted as possible qualifiers for the minimum income guarantee.

Age band	*Total count*	*Male*	*Female*
60–64	398,544	0	398,114
65–69	310,207	120,042	190,165
70–74	304,452	121,907	182,545
75–79	438,302	147,044	291,258
80–84	237,822	206,689	31,133
85–89	358,822	135,299	223,523
90+	158,287	45,001	113,286
Total	2,206,436	775,982	1,430,024

Better Government for Older People

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what financial assistance his Department provides, pursuant to the Better Government for Older People programme for older people who seek access to computer training and Internet services. [118397]

Mr. Rooker: This Department actively supports the Better Government for Older People programme, with many local offices working with the programme to examine ways to improve access to services for older people. While this has included a wide range of initiatives, none has provided access to computer training.

We recognise the need to provide quality services for older people and that they have their own needs and preferences as to how these are delivered. This is why we intend to bring together the current services the Department provides for pensions and pensioners into a new organisation. It will provide a unified, modern service for today's pensioners, whether they choose to deal with the Department by telephone, by post, face-to-face or through the Internet.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Global Environmental Change

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the recent report published by the Economic and Social Research Council on its global environmental change programme. [116985]

Mr. Meacher: These reports were received by the Department on 5 and 7 April; they are being studied at present.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many attributable *(a)* delays of 15 minutes or more and *(b)* station closures there were on London Underground on each line in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999; what changes there have been since 1997 in the way the figures are compiled; and what impact these changes have had on the figures. [117074]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for the London Underground who provide the information in the table to the London Regional Passenger Committee on a quarterly basis.

Year	*Number*
Train delays 15 minute or over	
1997	1,711
1998	1,820
1999	2,178
Station closures 15 minutes or over	
1997	1,304
1998	746
1999	1,088

These figures need to be considered within the context of an increase in services which contributed to a rise in train kilometres operated in 1999–2000 to an estimated 63.1 million.

There have been no changes in the way these figures have been compiled.

To provide the figures on a line by line basis would incur disproportionate cost.

Bus Shelters

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many new bus shelters have been built in each year since 1992; and how many shelters were upgraded in each year. [117272]

Mr. Hill: Figures provided by London Transport, who have powers to erect and maintain bus shelters in London, are shown in the table (1996–97 is the first year annual figures are available in the form requested).

	Built	Upgraded
1996–97	45	1,230
1997–98	0	1,360
1998–99	630	790
1999–2000	565	335

My Department does not have comparable figures for outside London, where the provision and maintenance of bus shelters is a matter for local authorities and bus operators.

EU Environment Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the outcome of the Environment Council held in Brussels on 30 March; and if he will make a statement. [117691]

Mr. Meacher: I represented the UK at the Environment Council in Brussels on 30 March 2000. Three sets of Council Conclusions were agreed, and proposals to tackle acidification, and on environmental liability, were debated.

Through Council Conclusions, a strategy for addressing threats to the environment from endocrine disrupting chemicals was endorsed, as outlined in a recent Commission Communication. The strategy will involve the establishment of a priority list of substances for evaluation and to prioritise testing. The need for quick and effective risk management measures where preliminary scientific evaluation reveals grounds for concern was also identified.

Council Conclusions were also agreed in response to the Commission Communication on a review of the fifth Environment Action Programme. These will assist the Commission in preparing a proposal for the sixth Environment Action Programme, due by the end of this year. The Council called for this to be a strategic document, setting clear priorities for the next 10 years and promoting a range of instruments to break the link between economic growth and environmental pressures. Climate change, waste management, resource use, biodiversity, soil degradation, desertification and reducing the environmental and health risks caused by chemicals and GMOs were identified as priorities for the programme. The need for better analysis of environmental issues and the costs and advantages of measures was also noted as was the need to improve implementation and enforcement of Community environmental legislation.

In advance of the Fifth Meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity to be held in Nairobi next month, Council Conclusions set out the EU position on the main issues on the agenda. Ministers were also updated on the successful conclusion of the negotiations on the Biosafety Protocol in January. There was also some discussion on the Community position for the next Conference of Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), taking place in April.

Ministers debated, for the second time, two related proposals to improve air quality. The first would set national emission ceilings on emissions of air pollutants that cause acidification, eutrophication and ground level ozone formation, and the second, target values for ozone in ambient air. Agreement had not been possible on a related proposal controlling emissions from large combustion plants, considered at the last Environment Council in December. Further negotiations on these measures are expected in the remainder of the Portuguese Presidency.

A first Ministerial discussion was held on the White Paper on Environmental Liability, adopted by the Commission in February. The Commission presented two recently published policy documents on climate change, one concerned with an EU wide emissions trading scheme and the other on common and co-ordinated policies and measures. Climate change was further discussed over lunch when Ministers considered preparations for the Sixth Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change taking place in November.

Presentations to Council were also given by the Commission on its Communication outlining the application of the Precautionary Principle, and on environmental indicators. The Presidency reported on the progress of two dossiers subject to conciliation with the European Parliament, the draft Water Framework Directive and draft End of Life Vehicles Directive. In response to a Swedish point under Any Other Business, I explained that I hoped shortly to forward to the Commission a completed environmental risk assessment and risk reduction strategy for the brominated flame retardant penta-BDE, and encouraged other member states to agree prompt action.

Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list his Department's expenditure limits, including any revisions following the Budget, for the years 1997–98 to 2001–02 on a consistent basis in the format of table 8.1 of the report, Modern Public Services for Britain (Cm 4011), in *(a)* cash terms and *(b)* current prices. [117500]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The table sets out the position on my Department's Main Programmes Departmental Expenditure Limit for the years 1997–98 to 2001–02, including the revisions announced in the Budget and £40 million provided subsequently for London Underground, in *(a)* cash terms and *(b)* current (2000–01) prices.

£ million

	1997–98 [1]	*1998–99* [1]	*1999–2000* [2]	*2000–01* [1]	*2001–02* [1]
(a) Cash terms					
Housing and other	3,186	3,385	3,726	4,360	4,981
Regeneration (including New Deal for Comunities)	1,405	1,183	1,452	1,542	1,832
Transport	2,940	2,680	3,193	3,599	3,843
London Underground, Rail Franchise Payments[4] and CTRL[5]	2,075	1,751	1,935	1,338	1,225
Total DETR	9,606	8,998	10,307	10,838	11,881
of which:					
Current Budget	4,109	4,021	4,581	4,736	4,940
Capital Budget	5,498	4,977	5,726	6,103	6,941

£ million

	1997–98 [1]	1998–99 [1]	1999–2000 [2]	2000–01 [3]	2001–02 [3]
(b) Current (2000–01 prices)					
Housing and other	3,448	3,548	3,810	4,360	4,860
Regeneration (including New Deal for Communities)	1,521	1,240	1,485	1,542	1,787
Transport	3,182	2,809	3,265	3,599	3,749
London Underground, Rail Franchise Payments[4] and CTRL[5]	2,246	1,835	1,979	1,338	1,195
Total DETR	10,396	9,430	10,538	10,838	11,591
of which:					
Current Budget	4,447	4,214	4,684	4,736	4,820
Capital Budget	5,950	5,216	5,855	6,103	6,772

[1] Outturn
[2] Estimated outturn
[3] Planned
[4] Includes sSRA
[5] Channel Tunnel Rail Link
Note:
Figures may not sum due to rounding

Public Transport (North-east)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to make public transport in the North East more affordable and accessible to those on low incomes. [117943]

Mr. Hill: For the three years 1998–99 to 2000–01 we are providing £1.3 million a year for additional rural bus services in the North East. In 1998–99 that money provided for 105 new or enhanced services. Further, we have provided £2.3 million for seven projects in the North East as part of the Rural Bus Challenge competitions, which aim to stimulate innovation in rural bus services.

The Transport Bill at present before Parliament contains provisions to guarantee that all elderly people will be entitled to at least half-price travel on local buses; we have recently announced that any associated bus pass will be free of charge. These measures will bring benefit to all regions but will be particularly welcome in areas where at present the local authority offer a less generous concessionary fare scheme, or none at all.

In addition, we have commissioned research to identify transport measures that could help to reduce social exclusion. The research, which is due to be completed shortly, looks specifically at the needs of people on low incomes.

Second Homes

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his oral answer of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 809, on second homes, what is the estimated timescale for making a decision on granting discretionary powers to local authorities to apply full council tax on second homes in certain circumstances. [118189]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Applying full council tax to second homes was one of the proposals made by respondents to our consultation last year on rural issues. We expect to publish our proposals for tackling rural problems in a Rural White Paper in the summer.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will declare a moratorium on the siting of telecommunications masts in residential areas until the health and safety implications have been fully explored. [118290]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, set up at the instigation of the Government and chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, is currently considering the possible health effects of the use of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters and is conducting a comprehensive assessment of existing research. The Group is expected to finalise its report shortly. The Government will consider the Group's recommendations and issue a response.

Rail Services

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he can take to increase the number of trains stopping at the Shotton and Hawarden railway stations; and if he will make a statement. [118191]

Mr. Hill: The Passenger Service Requirements in franchise agreements specify the minimum number of services which must call at particular stations. Train operators may provide additional services where they perceive a demand. Where additional calls at particular stations require additional subsidy this may be provided by local authorities, or through our Rail Passenger Partnership scheme.

Trains (Bicycle Carriage)

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with rail operators concerning ways of further facilitating the use of trains by cyclists with particular reference to *(a)* the removal or reduction of carriage charges for bicycles and *(b)* improvements in storage; and if he will make a statement. [118100]

Mr. Hill: The Secretary of State has had no such discussions. The current franchise agreements permit train operators to make a reasonable charge for carrying bicycles although this is a matter for the operators' commercial discretion and a number do not levy any charges. In the current franchise replacement negotiations, we have asked the Franchising Director to promote the

use of bicycles by seeking the reasonable provision by train operators of facilities for the carriage of cycles on trains and the storage of cycles at stations.

Local Deprivation Index

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what extra work is being carried out on the Index of Local Deprivation concerning *(a)* factor analysis, *(b)* shrinkage and *(c)* exponential distribution; and if he will make a statement. [118552]

Ms Beverley Hughes: All of the points raised during the consultation on the methodology have been considered and where necessary investigated through further data testing. A detailed response to the consultation, including the points raised on factor analysis, shrinkage and the exponential distribution will be released at the same time as we publish the new Index.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the 1999 rankings of local authority wards by level of deprivation will be released. [118551]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Index of Local Deprivation will be published within the next few months. At the same time all of the 1999 rankings of wards will be released.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consultation his Department is planning to hold with *(a)* the Local Government Association, *(b)* special interest groups of metropolitan authorities and *(c)* the Association of London Government before the publication of the new index of local deprivation. [118555]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The review of the Index of Local Deprivation has been subject to four rounds of consultation lasting 167 days in all. In addition the review has been overseen by a large inter departmental steering committee which included a representative from the Local Government Association. No further rounds of consultation are planned.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will release the new information on the index of local deprivation gathered as a consequence of the recent consultation exercise; and when the summary index on the new proposals will be published. [118553]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The new Index of Local Deprivation will be published within the next few months. A detailed document outlining our response to the consultation will be released at the same time.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish the study indexing poverty and prosperity by local authorities, compiled for his Department by Oxford university. [118498]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Index of Local Deprivation which covers all local authority districts and wards in England will be published within the next few months.

Devon County Council

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response he has made to the request from Devon county council for dispensation to pay for its redundancy and restructuring costs over a period of years. [118503]

Ms Armstrong: Devon county council asked to be allowed to treat these revenue costs as capital expenditure. Such applications are granted only when we conclude, in accordance with published criteria, that the costs could not be met out of available revenue resources. My officials have notified the council that, on the basis of the figures provided in January, the criteria are not satisfied and that consent will not be given.

Housing (Hampshire)

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the oral statement by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), of 21 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 181WH, what his assessment is of the potential for Hampshire county council to *(a)* reconsider the designation of land in its current plan and *(b)* increase further the provision for housing on previously used land. [118549]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have not made any such assessment.

Hampshire county council together with the unitary authorities will, in the light of advice in Planning Policy Guidance Note PPG3 and the emerging Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG), need to review their structure plan and bring forward alterations they consider necessary.

Meanwhile, the district and unitary authorities are required to consider PPG3 and the emerging RPG in preparing their local plans in conformity with the newly-adopted structure plan. The structure plan only distributes housing to district level, and apart from the four Major Development Areas, is not prescriptive. The districts, therefore, need to consider how to meet their requirements taking account of the advice in PPG3 on such matters as maximising use of land, avoiding inefficient development, encouraging higher densities and a wider variety of dwellings, thus reducing land take. In bringing forward their local plan proposals they should also take account of our advice to recycle existing buildings and to review all non-housing allocations including industrial and commercial allocations.

Speed Limits (HGVs)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to alter the speed limit for heavy goods vehicles on single carriage-way trunk roads. [118327]

Mr. Hill: Vehicle speed limits are set out in the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 and may be varied by regulation under the provision of section 86 of that Act. There are no plans to amend the maximum speed limits applicable to heavy goods vehicles on single carriageway roads. These are 50 mph for goods vehicles up to 7.5 tonnes maximum laden weight and 40 mph for those exceeding 7.5 tonnes.

Merchant Navy

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many British ratings were employed in the UK Merchant Fleet in each of the last five years. [118355]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency obtains data on UK seafarers from the Chamber of Shipping. The latest data available for UK ratings employed (by companies who are members of the Chamber) show that the figure is 11,340 as at May 1999.

A ratings task force, chaired by the Chamber of Shipping, has been set up and job opportunities for ratings will be considered.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many Merchant Navy officer cadets began training in the UK in each of the last five years. [118354]

Mr. Hill: The numbers of merchant navy officer cadets who began training in the UK in each of the last five years are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1995–96	398
1996–97	460
1997–98	465
1998–99	494
1999–2000	480

These figures relate only to cadets supported under the Government funded training schemes Government Assistance for Training (GAFT) prior to 1997–98 and Support for Maritime Training (SMarT) since then.

Shipping

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many new vessels were delivered to UK private-sector shipowners in each of the last five years; and what were their total cost and total tonnage. [118356]

Mr. Hill: Detailed information for the last nine available years is presented in Table 7.8 of Maritime Statistics 1998, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. This shows the number and value of expenditure of new ships delivered to UK private sector ship owners.

The information is summarised in the table.

Deliveries of new ships to UK private sector ship owners

	Number	*Value of Expenditure (£ million)*
1994	16	283
1995	13	472
1996	14	78
1997	25	298
1998	16	261

No information is readily available on the tonnage of these ships.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many foreign ships have been inspected under port state control arrangements in UK ports in each of the last five years; of those how many and what proportion had to be detained; and what percentage of inspected ships were found to have deficiencies. [118353]

Mr. Hill: The figures for foreign-flagged ships inspected by the UK under Port State Control are as follows:

Year	*Number PSC Inspections*	*Number detained*	*Percentage detained*	*Percentage with deficiencies*
1995–96	2,098	206	9.8	70.5
1996–97	1,880	157	8.4	71.3
1997–98	1,890	179	9.5	73.0
1998–99	1,980	155	7.8	74.8
1999–2000[1]	1,800	107	5.9	72.2

[1] Provisional figures

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many inspections were carried out by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in each of the last five years. [118352]

Mr. Hill: The figures for the numbers of ships inspected by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in each of the last five financial years are as follows:

Year	*Part State Control Inspections*	*Inspections of UK Ships*
1995–96	2,098	5,293
1996–97	1,880	4,626
1997–98	1,890	3,289
1998–99	1,980	3,668
1999–2000[1]	1,800	3,783

[1] Provisional figure

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many marine surveyors were employed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in each of the last five years. [118351]

Mr. Hill: Figures requested are given in the table. The Marine Safety Agency merged with the Coastguard Agency to become the Maritime and Coastguard Agency on 1 April 1998.

Staff in post, figures as at 31 March 2000

Year	*Number*
1996	166.5
1997	159
1998	160
1999	160
2000	149

Disabled Drivers

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what contingency plans he has made for providing continuing cover for parking for disabled drivers if badges were not received by 1 April; [118735]

(2) if he will make a statement on progress with the introduction of the new disabled parking badges. [118592]

Mr. Hill: The regulations to introduce the new blue parking badge for disabled people came into effect on 1 April.

Distribution of the new blue badges took place during the last week in March to local authorities who had placed orders. The majority of those local authorities received badges ready for business on Monday, 3 April. However, owing to some technical problems at the printer/supplier, some authorities did not receive the badges until Tuesday, 4 April.

My Department were informed by our supplier at the end of March that some local authorities had not placed orders for badges, despite letters prompting them to do so from both the Department and the badge supplier. Officials have since written again to all local authorities on this issue. From the checks we have carried out, and from the information provided by the supplier, we believe almost all local authorities have placed orders and have received a supply of badges. We have, however, taken the precaution of writing to ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) asking them to advise members not to take enforcement action against anyone displaying an orange badge which expires in April which is otherwise being used in accordance with the regulations.

We regret that the transition has not been as smooth as we would have wished, but we hope the action we have taken will avoid any distress or confusion for any disabled motorist who has difficulty getting a blue badge.

Contaminated Land

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what effect the contaminated land regime which came into force for England on 1 April will have on the programme of financial support to English local authorities and to the Environment Agency to meet the costs of dealing with contaminated land. [118940]

Mr. Mullin: The new contaminated land regime (under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990—inserted by section 57 of the Environment Act 1995) came into force in England on 1 April 2000. The Contaminated Land Supplementary Credit Approval (SCA) programme will continue to provide support to English local authorities to deal with contamination. The SCA programme will assist these local authorities in dealing with sites, for which they are responsible, that are deemed to be "contaminated land" under Part IIA. £21 million has been made available under this programme for 2000–01.

The SCA programme has provided valued support to English local authorities in dealing with contaminated land and, in later years, provided additional grand in aid to the Environment Agency. Under the new regime the grant will be available to the Agency in respect of their new duties for contaminated sites that are designated "Special Site" under Part IIA.

Authorities with on-going contractual commitments for projects funded in previous years have already received notification that support will continue to be available this year. I have agreed the programme for new projects to start this year and my Department has written today to the successful authorities and to the Environment Agency notifying them of the financial allocations which are being made.

The Department will discuss the other bids with the authorities concerned and expects to make some further allocations. It will also decide new bids when they are received.

The table sets out the allocations which have been made so far this current financial year.

Local authority	*Number of sites*	*Allocation for each authority (£)*
Alnwick DC	1	17,000
Bedfordshire CC	1	70,000
Bexley LB	1	50,000
Bristol City	1	100,000
Calderdale MBC	1	100,000
Derby City	2	49,000
Derbyshire CC	5	288,462
Devon CC	7	213,500
Dudley MBC	1	540,000
Durham CC	3	88,500
Ealing LB	1	23,851
Exeter City	1	332,414
Gateshead MBC	3	2,499,350
Hillingdon LB	1	20,000
Lancaster City	1	43,481
Leicester City	5	123,700
Merseyside WDA	3	397,000
Milton Keynes C	1	100,000
Newcastle-under-Lyme BC	1	7,000
Newham LB	2	1,432,860
North East Lincolnshire C	1	44,000
North Lincolnshire C	1	2,278,570
Nottingham City	2	401,713
Oldham MBC	3	30,300
Oxfordshire CC	9	493,793
Plymouth City	1	6,361
Portsmouth City	1	50,000
Rotherham MBC	2	177,628
Sandwell MBC	17	373,249
Solihull MBC	1	89,229
South Holland DC	1	12,750
St. Helens MBC	1	150,000
Tameside MBC	2	28,000
Trafford MBC	1	20,500
Vale Royal BC	1	10,000
Warwickshire CC	2	247,400
Warrington BC	2	76,135
West Sussex CC	1	672,000
Worcester City	1	5,000
Worcestershire CC	1	6,000
Environment Agency	8	1,164,000

Roads (Greater London)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which roads are to become the first Greater London Authority roads and Greater London Authority side roads; and if he will make a statement. [119094]

Mr. Hill: We consulted extensively in 1998 on which roads should be the responsibility of the Mayor and we announced the Government's intentions for the GLA road network in February 1999. The GLA road network is based on the current red and primary route networks with some adjustments in central London and docklands. Earlier this year, we consulted further on the detail of the orders needed to create the network we had announced. We received 53 responses. Many of these were technical drafting suggestions, but there were 26 which either

supported or opposed the inclusion of Belgrave Road in Pimlico. I have placed a summary of all the representations in the Library of the House.

I have considered carefully all the representations received. In the case of Belgrave Road, the Traffic Director for London has confirmed he is content with Westminster City council's proposals for traffic management in the area and the council has given assurances that they will undertake the necessary works. In the light of this, I have concluded that Belgrave Road should not be designated as a GLA road now. From 8 May, it will be for the Mayor to keep the GLA road network under review. The Mayor may change the GLA road network with the agreement of the local borough, or in the absence of such agreement, with the confirmation of the Secretary of State.

I have placed maps of the first GLA road network in the Library and shall shortly lay orders to designate the first GLA roads for which Transport for London, the Mayor's new transport executive, will be the highway and traffic authority from 3 July. I shall also be laying 32 GLA Side Roads Orders, one for each borough in which there are GLA roads. These orders will give Transport for London traffic authority powers over small sections of side roads associated with the GLA roads which are currently subject to red route controls.

Oil Stores (Water Pollution)

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to prevent water pollution from oil stores. [119203]

Mr. Meacher: I am today announcing the issue of a consultation paper seeking comments by 12 July on proposals to introduce new controls on water pollution from oil stores in England. I understand that the National Assembly for Wales is considering introducing similar proposals in due course.

Oil-related water pollution incidents in England accounted for 30 per cent. of all water pollution in 1998, mainly due to leaks from unbunded oil storage tanks. It is my intention to introduce new Regulations later this year to reduce the number of such oil-related incidents in England by about a half by the year 2005. This would be achieved by setting design standards for all above ground oil stores and requiring that secondary containment, such as a "bund" (a surrounding wall) or "drip tray" is in place to prevent oil escaping into controlled waters.

Oil pollution of fresh waters has grown in recent years, causing harm to wildlife, damage to our rivers and disruption to water supplies. These proposed new Regulations would be a cost-effective measure that would help to protect the environment.

Those mainly affected by the proposed new Regulations would include anyone storing oil on industrial, commercial, institutional (residential and non-residential) premises. There would be exceptions in certain circumstances, for example, where other controls exist or where the controls would not be cost-effective. Underground oil storage tanks can be regulated by the Environment Agency under the Groundwater Regulations 1998 and it is not considered necessary to introduce further controls.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Personal Envoys

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs under what code of conduct personal envoys operate. [116354]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 28 March 2000]:* Any individual acting on behalf of the Government is subject to the normal requirements including confidentiality and accountability to Ministers.

Kosovo

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which NATO member states' parliaments passed resolutions endorsing NATO's military action over Kosovo. [117828]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* According to our information, the parliaments of Germany, Denmark and Turkey passed formal resolutions on NATO's military actions over Kosovo. The Hungarian parliament approved the use of Hungarian airspace and airbases by NATO. The US House of Representatives also passed a resolution expressing support for the US Armed Forces engaged in military operations against FRY.

Russian Nuclear Arsenal

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to President Putin of Russia in respect of his recent statements on the capacity of the Russian nuclear arsenal. [118495]

Mr. Vaz: We have noted Acting President Putin's recent comments on the need for a reduced but more effective nuclear deterrent. We welcome his call for the early ratification of START II and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; and for early negotiations on the START III treaty.

These issues were most recently discussed at senior official level during last month's annual UK-Russian strategic stability talks.

UNIFIL

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the British Government have been asked to consider contributing troops to an expanded UNIFIL in the event of an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon by *(a)* the Israeli Government, *(b)* the Lebanon Government and *(c)* other Governments. [118311]

Mr. Hain: The British Government have received no requests to consider contributing troops to an expanded UNIFIL in the event of an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon by either *(a)* the Israeli Government, *(b)* the Lebanon Government or *(c)* other governments.

Burma

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the Burmese Government concerning the sentence imposed on Mr. James Mawdsley in Burma and his treatment in prison. [118658]

Mr. Hain: Our Ambassador in Rangoon regularly raises James's case with the Burmese authorities, including the Foreign Minister, Minister of Home Affairs and the Deputy Foreign Minister. The Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, also summoned the Burmese Ambassador in September last year to express our concerns about the case. Our Embassy have sent 43 official notes and one official letter to date.

In particular, we have protested about:

the failure of the Burmese authorities to inform us of his arrest;

the delay over consular access;

the denial of legal representation;

the length of the sentence;

mistreatment in prison;

lack of access to reading and writing material;

length of recreation time;

delay in getting the trial transcript;

delays in receiving food parcels, letters and books.

We will continue to do everything we can to help James and remain in frequent contact with his family.

Serbia and Montenegro

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the British Government are making contingency plans for intervention if Montenegrin steps towards independence are violently opposed by Serbia. [118253]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The international community, including the UK, is watching the situation in and around Montenegro closely. It would not be sensible to comment on contingency plans.

Intelligence Service Tribunal

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what arrangements have been made following the expiry of the terms of appointment of the members of the Intelligence Service Tribunal on 15 December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [119095]

Mr. Robin Cook: Lord Justice Mummery has been appointed as President of the Tribunal for a period of five years, following his predecessor's acceptance of an appointment to the post of Intelligence Services Commissioner. Sheriff John McInnes has been re-appointed as Vice President of the Tribunal and both he and Sir Richard Gaskell have been re-appointed to the Tribunal for a further period of five years.

Lord Justice Simon Brown, formerly president of the Intelligence Services Tribunal, has accepted an appointment as the Intelligence Services Commissioner for a period of three years from 1 April 2000.

WALES

Works of Art

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much has been spent on *(a)* the upkeep and *(b)* the purchase of works of art in his Department for each financial year since 1992. [117471]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 392W.

In addition, some works of art displayed within my Department are on loan from the National Museum and Galleries of Wales. My Department does not own any works of art, and no expenditure has been incurred since 1992 towards either upkeep or purchase.

Economy

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning the state of the Welsh economy; and if he will make a statement. [116231]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular meetings with the First Secretary and discuss a range of issues.

It is the sound policies of this Government that continue to build on our growing economy. The Budget is excellent news for the Welsh economy and will see Wales benefiting from increased spending on a number of valuable services. The health service in Wales will get an extra £99 million in 2000–01 from the Budget. Additionally, Wales will get a £50 million share for education and around £9.1 million for transport.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Computers for Teachers Initiative

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage of teachers have taken up the Computers for Teachers Initiative in England since its implementation; and if he will make a statement on the benefits of the scheme. [118702]

Mr. Wills: To date the DfEE has received some 9,000 applications under this initiative since its launch on 12 January 2000. This represents some 2.3 per cent. of teachers in England in the first three months of the scheme. This initiative is one of a series of initiatives to increase access to computers by teachers and headteachers.

The major financial incentive of up to £500 subsidy on the purchase of quality assured and high specification computer packages will encourage teachers to participate fully in the Information Age. Teacher competence and confidence in their personal use of ICT should be raised as take-up will be conditional on undertaking training in ICT use in the classroom available to teachers through the New Opportunities Fund. This in turn will benefit their approach to the use of ICT in the classroom. In this way, standards will be raised across all subjects, and school administration and management will be improved.

Curriculum 2000

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding is provided for Curriculum 2000 for each local education authority for the financial year 2000–01. [118559]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* Funding of £35 million for the Curriculum 2000 reforms has been included in Education Standard Spending for 2000–01.

Since local authority funding is unhypothecated, it would not be meaningful to break this figure down to local education authority level.

Capital Allocations (Cleethorpes)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total capital allocation since May 1997 to schools in the Cleethorpes constituency; and if he will break down these capital allocations by category. [118654]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is in the table.

£000

Capital programme	*Amount allocated to schools in the Cleethorpes constituency since May 1997*
Surplus Place Removal[1]	882
New Deal for Schools	2,263
Schools Access Initiative	80
Energy Management	13
Class Sizes	1,149
Grant for Voluntary Aided schools	536
Devolved Formula Capital	401
Total[2]	5,324

[1] Although credit approval was allocated in respect of projects to remove surplus places from schools in the Cleethorpes constituency, the local education authorities (LEAs) are not obliged to use the credit approval for those schools.

[2] We have made other capital allocations to the LEAs covered by the Cleethorpes constituency, but it is for the LEAs to decide which schools will benefit from the use of those allocations.

Pupil Behaviour

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps the Government are taking to help schools improve pupil behaviour. [118678]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* We are making nearly £500 million available over three years to help schools improve pupil behaviour. This is backed up with new guidance on "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support" issued last July which offers schools advice on good practice in tackling pupils' behavioural problems. In addition, the Excellence in Cities initiative includes the provision of Learning Mentors and Learning Support Units to help school better manage disruptive pupils.

And the new Connexions service will complement these initiatives in providing coherent and co-ordinated support for all young people when and where they need it to enable them to participate effectively in appropriate learning.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the impact on standards of educational achievement of poor behaviour in schools. [118677]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* My Department has not carried out an assessment of the impact of poor behaviour on achievement. However, data in the Department's Youth Cohort Study show that in 1997 31 per cent. of truanting pupils gained no GCSEs, compared to only 4 per cent. of non-truanting pupils.

In addition, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of School's latest annual report, published in February, shows the clear link between standards of behaviour and educational achievement. For example, in the majority of secondary schools pupils have positive attitudes to their lessons and to school; however, in a minority, pupils' attitudes to learning are particularly poor in Year 9 because not enough is done to respond to early indicators of pupil disaffection.

University for Industry

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in the establishment of the University for Industry. [118373]

Mr. Wills: Excellent progress is being made. Ufl Ltd. are on track to launch their products and services nationally in the autumn. A major publicity campaign began on 19 March to heighten public awareness of Ufl Ltd.'s learndirect brand and to stimulate demand for learning among adults. This is underpinned by the learndirect information and advice telephone helpline which has helped over one million callers.

Seventy-seven learndirect Development Centres across England, Wales and Northern Ireland are now working with Ufl Ltd. to test out aspects of their services and systems as well as developing new approaches to the delivery of flexible learning. The centres are currently piloting 24 on-line products.

Ufl Ltd. are maintaining a rolling process of updating and extending the range of products to be included in their portfolio for the autumn. Their initial priorities are basic skills, ICT skills at all levels and business skills for SMEs. Over 60 per cent. of the learning portfolio will be available on-line initially and people will be able to access learndirect products and services at home, in the workplace or at learning centres nation-wide. The learndirect information and advice service will also be available on-line from May.

Academic Staff

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what response he has sent to the recent AUT/London University Institute of Education joint paper on the involvement of academic staff in the wider economy. [118430]

Mr. Wicks: The Government are already encouraging universities to forge links with the wider economy. The DfEE and DTI are funding, in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment in Northern Ireland, the Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community Fund. Around £83 million is expected to be spent over six financial years. The fund aims to achieve systematic and sustainable change within universities and in how they relate to business through, for example, establishing centres of expertise in business links within universities, and training and development for staff, including programmes of staff exchange.

Special Needs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement

on the composition, financing and operations of the 11 Special Educational Needs Regional Co-ordination Projects in England. [118645]

Jacqui Smith: The 11 Special Education Needs Regional Co-ordination Projects are formed as follows:

North East

Redcar and Cleveland, Durham, Northumberland, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Gateshead, Sunderland, Darlington, Hartlepool, Stockton-on-Tees and Middlesbrough.

East of England

Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Luton, Norfolk, Southend-on-Sea, Peterborough and Thurrock.

London

All 33 London boroughs.

Merseyside

St. Helens, Halton, Liverpool, Knowsley, Sefton and Wirral.

South West

Devon, Cornwall, North Somerset, City of Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Plymouth, Torbay, Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset, Gloucestershire, Swindon, Wiltshire, Bournemouth, Dorset, Poole and Isles of Scilly.

West Midlands

Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Wolverhampton, Warwickshire, Walsall, Telford and Wrekin, Birmingham, Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Herefordshire.

North West

Lancashire, Blackpool, Blackburn with Darwin, Wigan, Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham, Tameside, Stockport, Manchester, Trafford, Salford, Warrington, Cheshire and Cumbria.

South East

Kent, Brighton and Hove, East Sussex, Medway, Surrey and West Sussex.

South Central

Hampshire, Bracknell Forest, Buckinghamshire, Isle of Wight, Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire, Portsmouth, Reading, Slough, Southampton, West Berkshire and Windsor and Maidenhead.

East Midlands

Northamptonshire, Derby, Derbyshire, Leicester, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire and Rutland.

Yorkshire and the Humber

Kirklees, Barnsley, Bradford, Calderdale, Doncaster, East Riding of Yorkshire, City of Kingston upon Hull, Leeds, North East Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire, North Yorkshire, Rotherham, Sheffield, Wakefield and York.

Each Project is bringing together local education authorities, private and voluntary organisations with relevant interests, health and social services, and training providers. The Department for Education and Employment is providing almost £1 million this year to support the network.

Each Project has determined its own focus and priorities to ensure that they address issues of concern within their region. The focus of the projects ranges from providing for pupils with low incidence disabilities to strategic planning to support inclusion. Early evidence shows that these projects will help to improve and to make more coherent services for children with special educational needs or disabilities.

A formal evaluation programme is in place. Early findings should be available in late summer. We also plan to publish a first set of good practice case studies during the autumn term.

Teachers (Performance-related Pay)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what account has been taken of the situation of *(a)* disabled and *(b)* part-time teachers in the threshold procedures for performance-related pay. [118372]

Ms Estelle Morris: The new performance threshold arrangements are accessible to all qualified teachers, including disabled and part-time teachers covered by the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Documents. Teachers' applications will be assessed in the context in which the applicant works. The assessment is about the effectiveness of the teacher in his or her own job.

The DfEE is committed to pursuing equal opportunities and has taken a series of steps to ensure that threshold arrangements do not discriminate on any grounds. The independent external assessors deployed to verify the assessments made by headteachers will receive training in equal opportunities issues and will work to a code of conduct which includes a commitment to pursuing equal opportunities. Their activities will be quality assured internally and by the Department. Applications made by teachers for threshold assessment will also be monitored for equal opportunities implications.

New Deal (Disabled People)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in the establishment of the New Deal for Disabled People. [118371]

Ms Hodge: In his March 2000 Budget statement the Chancellor announced the intention to develop plans for extending the New Deal for Disabled People nationally. We want to build on what we have learnt so far; we also want to ensure that we continue to evolve and evaluate new ways of providing opportunities for disabled people. We intend to announce our detailed plans in June.

Irish Community

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action his Department is taking to *(a)* identify and *(b)* address the specific needs of the Irish community in Britain. [107584]

Mr. Wills: This Department is committed to ensuring all its policies and programmes promote equality of opportunity for disabled people, ethnic minorities and between men and women.

Furthermore, Irish was added as a national curriculum language in 1999 in response to representations from schools with a large Irish intake.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Minimum Income Guarantee

6. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State

for Northern Ireland what is his assessment of the impact of the Minimum Income Guarantee on pensioners in Northern Ireland. [117376]

8. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the impact of the Minimum Income Guarantee on pensioners in Northern Ireland. [117378]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government are committed to helping pensioners who are just getting by, to get more, through the Minimum Income Guarantee. Around 73,000 pensioners in Northern Ireland are already receiving their Minimum Income Guarantee through Income Support. We are now turning our attention to 40,000 pensioners, who may not be claiming but are possibly entitled.

RUC

7. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the future of the name and insignia of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. [117377]

Mr. Ingram: In his statement to the House on 19 January 2000 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced that the Government have accepted that the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary should be changed to the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

My right hon. Friend also announced that the new name would come into effect in the autumn of 2001 and that at the same time a new service badge will be introduced. The new Policing Board will be consulted on the new badge.

Port of Belfast

9. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on employment at the Port of Belfast. [117379]

Mr. Ingram: I am advised that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, who are the Harbour Authority for the Port of Belfast, directly employ 133 people at present. Within the Harbour Estate, as a whole, it is estimated that about 15,000 people are employed in a wide range of industrial and commercial activity.

11. **Jane Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the future of the port of Belfast. [117381]

Mr. Ingram: A proposal by Belfast Harbour Commissioners involving the transfer of the Port of Belfast to the private sector, with a view to establishing a public/private partnership, with Government retaining a "golden" share interest, is under consideration. A further option, involving the restructuring of the port while retaining its true port status, is also being examined at present.

Given the vital role of the port in relation to the Northern Ireland economy, its future is a matter of considerable importance not only to the port authority and port users, but also to those in industry and commerce in Northern Ireland.

Security

10. **Mr. Day:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland. [117380]

17. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland. [117432]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Members to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on 12 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 352–53.

Decommissioning

12. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the progress of decommissioning under the Belfast Agreement. [117382]

13. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on arms decommissioning. [117383]

Mr. Ingram: Efforts are continuing to seek a way forward to enable decommissioning to occur as soon as possible. We would urge the IRA to re-engage with the Decommissioning Commission immediately.

22. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his latest assessment of the prospects for decommissioning. [117437]

25. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the prospects for decommissioning of terrorist arms and explosives in Northern Ireland. [117440]

26. **Dr. Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the prospects for decommissioning of illegally held terrorist weapons. [117441]

27. **Mr. Gill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the prospects for decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives in Northern Ireland. [117442]

Mr. Ingram: The Government cannot force decommissioning to occur. It has to be a voluntary, inclusive and consensual process. I hope by 22 May we will have the issue addressed. The all-party consultation process that is now under way is designed to re-build confidence on all sides so that progress can be made.

Young Offenders

14. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on developments in the treatment of young offenders. [117384]

Mr. Ingram: The report of the Review of the Criminal Justice system in Northern Ireland was published on 30 March 2000. The report puts forward almost 300 recommendations covering all aspects of the criminal justice system, including a number which deal directly with arrangements for young people who offend. The Government are now consulting with the political parties, the Irish Government, members of the public and those

working within the criminal justice system. I would welcome my hon. Friend's contribution to the debate on these important issues.

In a separate exercise, a departmental review of the juvenile justice centre estate has been published for consultation. The purpose of this exercise is to determine the number and location of juvenile justice centres needed against a background of a reduced custody population. The consultation period will extend over three months.

Troop Levels

15. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many soldiers were on duty in the Province on *(a)* the date on which he assumed office and *(b)* over the Christmas period in 1999. [117430]

Mr. Ingram: Military strengths are recorded on the first of each month and it is therefore not possible to provide an accurate figure for the dates requested. On 1 October 1999 there were 14,552 soldiers in the province and on 1 January 2000 there were 14,319 soldiers in the Province. These are the nearest available dates to those requested.

The figures quoted are for troops available for duty including part-time Royal Irish soldiers. It is not possible to establish the numbers who were actually on duty on these dates.

Political Developments

16. **Mrs. Gillan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on political developments in Northern Ireland. [117431]

18. **Mr. Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the peace process in Northern Ireland. [117433]

23. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on recent political developments in Northern Ireland. [117438]

Mr. George Howarth: We continue to work in close co-operation with the Irish Government and in consultation with the political parties in Northern Ireland to try to find a way forward which will permit the restoration of the institutions as soon as possible and the implementation of the remaining aspects of the Agreement. Progress continues to be made on the implementation of the Agreement: on 30 March I announced the publication of the review of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland and I expect to bring forward proposals to this House before Easter on matters related to the implementation of the Patten Commission's report on policing in Northern Ireland.

Direct Rule

19. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about the administrative difficulties arising from restoring direct rule and from a reduced ministerial team. [117434]

Mr. George Howarth: The re-introduction of direct rule, while necessary to safeguard the institutions from collapse, is no substitute for local political representatives, accountable to the people of Northern Ireland, taking decisions about local issues. On Ministerial complement I am content for the time being with this, but should direct rule continue indefinitely, then I would expect the Prime Minister to decide to increase it.

Victim Support

20. **Mr. Hunter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much funding organisations claiming to support victims of violence have received *(a)* from the Government and *(b)* from EU sources in the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [117435]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments fund a number of self-help groups, organisations and agencies which support victims of violence and their families. Some of theses organisations do not, however, exist solely to help victims, and there are other organisations which assist victims but do not receive public funding. I have set out the available information on groups which have received funding over the last five years.

With the exception of the NIO's grant to Victim Support (NI) (those sums marked *), payments made by NIO represent 25 per cent. fully additional funding towards projects which have received 75 per cent. funding from the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (EUSSPPR), which began in 1995, and grants for small pilot schemes paid by the Victims Liaison Unit (those marked **). A total grant of £225,000 is being administered on behalf of the Victims Liaison Unit by the Community Relations Council for which a break down in amounts paid to each group is not available until the scheme ends in July 2000.

Funding made available by DOE and the Department of Social Development has been provided through Making Belfast Work.

In addition the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have issued letters to offer to Fair for £5,000 and South Armagh British Victims for £2,500. The amounts are expected to be drawn down from the Rural Development Council.

1995–96

£

	Northern Ireland Office	*Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council*	*Department of the Environment/ Department of Social Development*	*European Union*
Ballynfeigh Community Development Initiative	—	7,300.00	—	—
CALMS	—	9,000.00	—	—
Cornerstone Community	—	41,600.00	—	—
Corrymeela	—	165,000.00	—	—
CRUSE	7,000.00	—	—	21,000.00

1995–96

£

	Northern Ireland Office	Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council	Department of the Environment/ Department of Social Development	European Union
FAIT	—	43,400.00	—	—
Survivors of Trauma	—	—	1,000.00	—
Victim Support (NI)	*370,000.00	—	—	—
WAVE	—	24,000.00	280.00	—
Women Together	—	25,800.00	—	—

1996–97

£

	Northern Ireland Office	Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council	Department of the Environment/ Department of Social Development	European Union
Ballynfeigh Community Development Initiative	—	21,000.00	—	—
CALMS	7,000.00	18,000.00	—	21,000.00
Community Development Centre North Belfast	—	16,500.00	—	—
Cornerstone Community	—	44,600.00	—	—
Corrymeela	—	165,000.00	—	—
Cost of the Troubles Study	10,000.00	—	—	30,000.00
CRUSE	5,682.50	—	—	17,047.50
Institute for Counselling	2,200.00	—	—	6,600.00
FAIT	—	30,200.00	—	—
NI Music Therapy	4,000.00	—	—	12,000.00
Newtownabbey Victim Support	—	—	570.00	—
Partnership for those affected by the Troubles	10,000.00	—	—	30,000.00
Passionist Youth and Parent Resource Centre	—	—	74,000.00	—
Shankill Stress	750.00	—	—	2,250.00
Survivors of Trauma	9,200.00	—	—	27,600.00
Treetops	187.50	—	—	562.50
Victim Support (NI)	3,000.00	—	—	9,000.00
	*398,000.00	—	—	—
WAVE	9,000.00	33,000.00	—	27,000.00
Women Together	—	37,100.00	—	—

1997–98

£

	Northern Ireland Office	Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council	Department of the Environment/ Department of Social Development	European Union
Ballynfeigh Community Development Initiative	—	21,000.00	—	—
Barnardos	8,650.00	—	—	25,950.00
Bogside and Brandywell Initiative	7,536.25	—	—	22,608.75
CALMS	8,750.00	—	—	26,250.00
Coleraine/Ballymoney Branch Reg UDR	750.00	—	—	2,250.00
Columba Support Services	2,358.00	—	—	7,074.00
Community Development Centre North Belfast	—	44,000.00	—	—
Cornerstone Community	—	44,600.00	—	—
Corrymeela	—	165,000.00	—	—
Cost of the Troubles	—	—	16,400.00	—
CRUSE	8,977.75	—	—	26,933.25
DPOA	5,025.00	—	—	15,075.00
Institute for Counselling	550.00	—	—	2,200.00
FAIT	—	31,600.00	—	—
FEAR	750.00	—	—	2,250.00
Lifeline	800.00	—	—	2,400.00
NI Intermediate Treatment Association	9,600.00	—	—	28,800.00
NI Music Therapy	1,000.00	—	—	3,000.00
Partnership for those affected by the Troubles	2,500.00	—	—	7,500.00
St. James Community Forum	5,300.00	—	—	15,900.00
Shankill Stress	17,075.00	—	—	51,225.00
Survivors of Trauma	10,507.50	—	8,700.00	31,522.50
Tar Isteach	—	—	4,700.00	—
Victim Support (NI)	3,750.00	—	—	11,250.00
	*480,000.00	—	—	—
WAVE	17,865.00	36,400.00	25,600.00	53,595.00
Women Together	—	32,100.00	—	—

1998–99

£

	Northern Ireland Office	*Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council*	*Department of the Environment/ Department of Social Development*	*European Union*
Ballynfeigh Community Development Initiative	—	21,000.00	—	—
Ballymoney District Partnership	52,000.00	—	—	6,000.00
Ballymurphy Women's Support Group	3,855.50	—	—	11,566.50
Bogside and Brandywell	8,478.00	—	—	25,434.00
CALMS	1,750.00	—	—	5,250.00
Community Development Centre North Belfast	—	44,000.00	—	—
Cornerstone Community	—	44,600.00	—	—
Corrymeela	—	165,000.00	—	—
Cost of the Troubles Study	—	—	—	—
COTTS	18,250.00	—	—	54,750.00
	**10,197.00	—	—	—
Counselling Network	—	—	2,000.00	—
CRUSE	21,637.75	—	—	64,913.25
Cunamh	475.00	—	—	1,425.00
Disability Action	**6,170.00	—	—	—
FAIR	1,250.00	2,000.00	—	3,750.00
FAIT	—	33,500.00	—	—
HURT	7,000.00	—	—	21,000.00
Institute for Counselling and Personal Development	3,200.00	—	—	9,600.00
NI Intermediate Treatment Association	12,400.00	—	—	37,200.00
NI Music Therapy Trust	4,000.00	—	—	12,000.00
Rape Crisis—Sexual Abuse Centre	4,367.75	—	—	13,103.25
Relatives for Justice	6,375.00	—	32,000.00	19,125.00
St. James' Community	1,325.00	—	—	3,975.00
Shankill Stress	12,225.00	—	—	36,675.00
	**5,000.00	—	—	—
Survivors of Trauma	8,100.00	—	—	24,300.00
	**5,000.00	—	—	—
The Bloody Sunday Trust	750.00	—	—	2,250.00
Victim Support (NI)	*717,000.00	—	—	17,850.00
	5,950.00	—	—	—
VOICE	550.00	—	—	1,650.00
Victims and Survivors Trust	7,625.00	1,800.00	—	22,875.00
WAVE	36,614.00	35,000.00	1,100.00	109,842.00
	**30,000.00	—	—	—
Wider Circle	4,666.75	—	—	14,000.25
Women Together	—	32,100.00	—	—

1999–2000

£

	Northern Ireland Office	*Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council*	*Department of the Environment/ Department of Social Development*	*European Union*
Amach Agus Isteach	—	—	43,000.00	—
Bogside and Brandywell Trust	1,695.50	—	—	586.50
CALMS	8,130.00	—	—	24,390.00
Community Conflict Impact on Children	**17,470.20	—	—	—
Coleraine/Ballymoney UDR	1,780.00	—	—	5,340.00
Cornerstone Community	—	44,600.00	—	—
Corrymeela	—	165,000.00	—	—
CRUSE	11,450.00	—	—	34,350.00
Cunamh	8,769.75	—	—	26,309.25
Columba Victim Support	5,475.00	—	—	16,425.00
Corpus Christi	4,850.00	—	—	14,550.00
COTTS	6,300.00	—	—	18,900.00
Counselling Network	2,350.00	—	—	7,050.00
DPOA	5,710.00	—	—	17,130.00
Drumcree Community Trust	500.00	—	—	1,500.00
FAIR	7,500.00	—	—	22,500.00
FACT	15,190.00	—	—	45,570.00
Fermanagh District Partnership	840.00	—	—	2,520.00
Greater Ballymurphy Women's Community Support Group	4,579.00	—	—	13,738.50
HURT	3,850.00	—	—	11,550.00
Lifeline	1,040.00	—	—	3,120.00
Lifeways	7,600.00	—	—	22,800.00
Loughgall Truth and Justice	1,050.00	—	—	3,150.00

1999–2000

£

	Northern Ireland Office	*Community Relations Unit/ Community Relations Council*	*Department of the Environment/ Department of Social Development*	*European Union*
Mount Help Centre	3,600.00	—	—	10,800.00
Nexus	13,749.00	—	—	41,247.00
NE Antrim Cluster	2,000.00	—	—	6,000.00
NI Music Therapy	4,641.50	—	—	13,924.50
Omagh Support and Self Help Group	1,000.00	—	—	3,000.00
PR and RT	4,000.00	—	—	12,000.00
Relatives for Justice	1,500.00	—	—	4,500.00
St. James Community Forum	4,223.50	—	—	12,670.00
Shankill Stress	10,575.00	—	—	31,725.00
Strabane Briefing	8,924.00	—	—	26,772.00
SDAHW	5,800.00	—	—	17,400.00
Survivors of Trauma	13,210.00	—	—	39,630.00
The Bloody Sunday Trust	2,274.00	—	—	6,822.00
Victim Support (NI)	*767,000.00	—	—	—
Victims and Survivors Trust	3,770.25	—	15,000.00	11,310.75
VOICE	4,625.00	—	—	13,875.00
WAVE	27,388.25	35,000.00	—	82,164.75
Women Together	—	32,100.00	—	—
West Tyrone VOICE	6,100.00	—	—	18,300.00

Patten Commission

21. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what further discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland political parties regarding the implementation of the Patten Commission's recommendations on policing in Northern Ireland. [117436]

Mr. Ingram: The Government consulted widely on the implementation of the Patten Commission's recommendations as required by the Good Friday Agreement. Although formal consultation ended at the end of November 1999 Ministers and officials have continued to meet the political parties to discuss a range of issues in the Patten Report. These meetings are part of the Government's effort to listen to concerns and put the Government's message across with a view to obtaining the widest possible acceptance and understanding of the Government's decisions in making the police service in Northern Ireland more representative, acceptable and accountable.

Shipbuilding

24. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what support he is giving the shipbuilding industry in Northern Ireland. [117439]

Mr. Ingram: The Government will continue to give Harland and Wolff every support they can in seeking out new profitable work for the Belfast yard so as to safeguard employment and skills there. Ministers and Departments in Northern Ireland are in contact with the company to discuss how we can work together in the light of present difficulties. The company is currently following up on potential new building contracts.

Human Rights

28. **Mr. Trimble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the current application in Northern Ireland of the European convention on human rights. [117443]

Mr. George Howarth: The European Convention on Human Rights applies in Northern Ireland in the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe.

Assembly

29. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland under what conditions he would recommend that the Northern Ireland Assembly should have its suspension lifted. [117444]

Mr. George Howarth: The decision to suspend the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly and therefore preserve the institution from collapse was taken because the cross-community confidence necessary to make it work had begun to ebb. We are continuing to work in close co-operation with the Irish Government and in consultation with the political parties in Northern Ireland to try to achieve an understanding which gives both sides the necessary confidence to enable an early restoration of the Assembly to occur.

Violence Victims

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what criteria are used to decide which groups claiming to support victims of violence should receive public funds. [117122]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments fund a number of groups which support victims of violence. Individual Government Departments have different responsibilities and assess applications against different criteria.

The Community Relations Unit

The criteria against which applications are assessed by the Community Relations Unit, a Unit within the office of the First and Deputy First Ministers, relate to the improvement of community relations activities and the appreciation of cultural diversity.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The criteria used for selecting groups are the Rural Development Council's standard criteria under their PlaNet Programme. It has the following minimum requirements:

Applicant is a bona fide group.

Based in a rural area.

In an area of disadvantage.

Openness to cross-community participation.

Willingness to address social inclusion issues.

Commitment to group development.

The Department of Social Development

Projects should provide good value for money and as an essential requirement should:

Have specific quantitative and, where appropriate, qualitative, objectives which should be clearly identified.

In accordance with the Making Belfast Work mission statement, be of direct benefit to local communities and be seen by them as needed.

Demonstrate the involvement and influence of the local community in the decisions which affect them.

Complement or be consistent with agreed area strategies.

Be additional to mainstream departmental or agency work, or influence to a significant degree such programmes as they apply to Belfast.

Should be capable of being absorbed into mainstream funding at the end of a specific period or funded from sources other than Making Belfast Work; only in very exceptional cases will Making Belfast Work funding continue beyond three years for any individual project.

Projects will be given preference if they:

Adopt a strategic, innovative, preventative and multi-agency approach to the problems of an area.

Achieve, or at the very least encourage, a high level of local employment.

Involve partnerships among the public, voluntary and private sectors.

Demonstrably enhance the provision of public services in the area.

Harness the skills and experience of the voluntary sector and encourage volunteering.

The Northern Ireland Office

Measure 4.4 of the EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme specifically targets funding at victims and ex-prisoners groups. Decisions about which groups should be funded are taken by an Intermediary Funding Body, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust. This method of distribution of funding meets one of the main criteria set down by the European Commission; that decisions with regard to funding should as far as possible be taken at community level. The criteria used by the NIVT in making decisions are:

Clearly demonstrate that they meet the objectives of the sub-programme and measure them (i.e. helping those who are victims of the conflict to come to terms with their losses and accelerate the healing process).

Be backed by sound community development practices and principles.

Promote the full inclusion of marginalised groups and people.

Improve the accessibility of and quality of services for marginalised groups and people.

Promote the active participation of marginalised groups and people in the design and delivery of programmes.

Use approaches which are innovative and imaginative.

Promote gender balance in the management structures of the projects.

Where feasible, have a cross-community dimension.

Victims Liaison Unit

The Community Relations Council, which currently administers the Victim Support Grant Scheme, on behalf of the Victims Liaison Unit assesses applications under any of the following criteria:

Seeking funding to help establish a new group working in the area of victims. The group will need to demonstrate that there is an unmet need which cannot be filled by an existing group or service.

To carry out a "needs analysis".

To train volunteers or staff in the wide range of relevant support services.

To produce training or other resource materials which could be of use to groups or individuals working in this area.

To demonstrate models of good practice.

Priority will be given to projects which can produce results in the time and financial scale of the scheme.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures *(a)* he is taking and *(b)* he proposes to take to ensure that public funds given to organisations which claim to support victims of violence are used for that purpose. [117124]

Mr. Ingram: As with any grant award, all projects supported by the Community Relations Unit are subjected to an on going system of regular review and monitoring to ensure that funds are being used for the intended purpose. In addition, projects are also subject to evaluation.

To ensure that public funds paid to victims of violence groups are used for that purpose, both the NIVT and the NIO carry out verification visits on victims of violence projects. In addition to those checks, independent consultants are employed to carry out audits on a range of public funded projects, including victims of violence projects.

Within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, funds will not be issued until there is an agreed action plan between the group and the Rural Development Council. The Rural Development Council is about to recruit an Audit Officer who will carry out audits/inspection visits to ensure that grant aid has been expended for the purpose for which it was given.

Making Belfast Work projects are monitored by Departmental staff to ensure that groups comply with the terms and conditions attached to the letter of offer or grant.

The Government will continue to monitor and evaluate awards to ensure public funds are used for the purpose for which they were granted.

Management Trainee Assessment Centre

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many companies were invited to tender for the development of the 1998 Management Trainee Assessment Centre; to which company the contract was awarded; what use was made of the results of the Assessment Centre; what plans he has to re-use the materials developed by the contractor; how much was paid to the contractor for work relating to the 1998 Management Trainee Assessment Centre as a percentage of the initial quoted costs; and if he will make a statement. [117317]

Mr. Ingram: Five companies were invited to tender for the 1998 Management Trainee Assessment Centre; the contract was awarded to ASE Consultants; the results of the Assessment Centre were used to determine the rate of progress of individuals on the Management Trainee scheme; there are no plans to re-use the material developed by the contractor for the 1998 Assessment Centre; the amount paid to the contractor for work relating to the 1998 Management Trainee Assessment Centre was the same as the initial costs quoted for the work.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the cost to date of the Saville Inquiry; and if he will make a statement. [117700]

Mr. Ingram: The total costs incurred by The Bloody Sunday Inquiry up to 31 March 2000 are £19,244,028.

Train Chassis Corrosion

Mr. Walker: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the cost of re-welding train chassis operated by Translink in each of the last three years. [117866]

Mr. Ingram: Translink have informed the Department of Regional Development that they spent £615,706 on rewelding train carriage bogies in 1998–99 but nothing in 1997–98 or 1999–2000.

Chief Electoral Officer

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what his reasons are for barring Irish citizens from submitting applications for the post of Chief Electoral Officer. [117255]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The post of Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland is a Crown Appointment. It was considered appropriate to reserve the post for UK nationals because it discharges sensitive functions of fundamental importance to public life in Northern Ireland, including overseeing the conduct of elections.

PRIME MINISTER

Rented Housing (London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Prime Minister what policies are being taken forward by Her Majesty's Government to increase the supply of affordable rented housing in inner London. [117461]

The Prime Minister: The Government are acutely aware of the difficulties many Londoners face in securing good quality housing at a price they can afford. That is why we are giving local authorities and registered social landlords in London an additional £1.3 billion of resources for investment in housing between 1997–98 and 2001–02. London boroughs have received £400 million of these extra resources already.

The Housing Green Paper which was announced last week by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister sets out our aims to ensure a sufficient supply of high quality affordable housing is provided where it is needed, including a new Starter Home Initiative. Londoners will be among those who benefit from our proposals.

Ministerial Code

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the compatibility between paragraphs 126 and 128 of the Ministerial Code and the use by himself, his family, persons within his employ and Ministers within his Government since 1 May 1997 of properties overseas owned by the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson). [116101]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 27 March 2000]:* It is for individual Ministers to determine their actions in accordance with the Ministerial Code. I am not aware of any breach of the Code in relation to these properties.

Serbia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library a copy of his letter to the hon. Member for Linlithgow of 4 April, relating to military action against Serbia. [118398]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what recent reports he has received relating to the type and extent of bomb damage in Serbia in connection with the use of uranium armament; and if he will make a statement. [117522]

The Prime Minister: The UN Environment Programme published a report in October 1999, which noted, inter alia, that many environmental problems in the FRY

> do not result from the recent war, but from years of environmental neglect.

The report's authors have suggested that between 50 and 70 per cent. of the pollution pre-dated the conflict.

Following that report, the United Nations asked NATO for information about use of depleted uranium (DU) during the Kosovo conflict. The NATO Secretary-General has responded, confirming that DU was used in operations against armoured equipment, mainly in Western Kosovo.

Kashmir

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Prime Minister what steps he is taking towards finding a permanent and peaceful solution to the situation in Kashmir. [118505]

The Prime Minister: We continue to urge both India and Pakistan to return to bilateral dialogue to find a just and lasting solution acceptable to the people of Kashmir.

Cancer Services

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Prime Minister what progress has been made in improving cancer care services since he hosted the Cancer Summit in May 1999. [118323]

The Prime Minister: Improving cancer services is one of our top priorities for the National Health Service. For the first time we have a single Minister with responsibility both for cancer prevention and treatment. We have also appointed Professor Mike Richards as the new National Cancer Director to spearhead the drive for fairer, faster cancer services and to ensure the implementation of tough

new standards of care. A broad programme of work has been put in place to ensure prompt access to cancer diagnosis and treatment and to improve the quality of our cancer services.

We are committed to modernising cancer services and have invested an extra £70 million since 1997 for breast, colo-rectal, lung and outpatient cancer services. £80 million has been made available to cut waiting times, and we are investing £100 million in cancer equipment, with the New Opportunities Fund allocating a further £93 million to this area.

We have introduced a new two-week outpatient standard waiting time for all urgent cancer referrals. This has been in place for breast cancer patients since April 1999 and over 56,000 women have benefited from this standard. This high standard of care will be extended to all those with suspected cancer requiring urgent investigation by the end of this year.

To help improve the quality of cancer services we have published evidence-based guidance on improving outcomes for breast, colo-rectal, lung and gynaecological cancers. Guidance on stomach cancers will be available in the spring, and over the next two years the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will commission further guidance on a range of other cancers.

Personal Envoys

Mr. Maude: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list the people he has asked to convey messages to foreign Governments, whom he has not described as his personal envoys; on what dates those messages were taken; and to which Governments those messages were sent; [118287]

(2) how many personal envoys he has appointed; on what dates those personal envoys were appointed; to which Governments those personal envoys have made representations; and when. [118282]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 574W.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Prime Minister when *(a)* Lord Ahmed and *(b)* Lord Paul were appointed as Prime Ministerial envoys; and what public notification was issued at the time. [118429]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Lord Ahmed and Lord Paul have not been appointed as Prime Ministerial envoys.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 April. [118370]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

Security and Intelligence Service Commissioners

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements have been made to appoint a Commissioner under section 8 of the Intelligence Services Act 1994 following the expiration of Lord Justice Stuart-Smith's appointment on 15 December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [119150]

The Prime Minister: Lord Justice Stuart-Smith has accepted an extension of his appointment as Intelligence Services Commissioner until 31 March 2000 to enable him to complete his Annual Report for 1999. He recently completed that term. I thank Lord Justice Stuart-Smith for the contribution he made during his five years as Intelligence Services Commissioner.

Lord Justice Simon Brown, formerly President of the Intelligence Service Tribunal, has accepted an appointment as the Intelligence Service Commissioner for a period of three years from 1 April 2000.

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements have been made to appoint a Commissioner under section 4 of the Security Service Act 1989 following the expiration of Lord Justice Stuart-Smith's appointment on 13 December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [119148]

The Prime Minister: Lord Justice Stuart-Smith accepted an extension of his appointment as Security Service Commissioner until 31 March 2000 to enable him to complete his Annual Report for 1999. He recently completed that term. I thank Lord Justice Stuart-Smith for the contribution he made during the ten years he spent as Security Service Commissioner.

Lord Justice Simon Brown, formerly President of the Intelligence Service Tribunal, has accepted an appointment as the Security Service Commissioner for a period of three years from 1 April 2000.

Advisory Committee on Business Appointments

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the members of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments; and if he will make a statement. [119149]

The Prime Minister: The current members are:

The right hon. Lord Mayhew of Twysden QC (Chairman)
Sir John Blelloch KCB (Vice-chairman)
The right hon. Lord Shore of Stepney
The right hon. Baroness Williams of Crosby
The Lord Wilson of Tillyorn GCMG
Admiral Sir Kenneth Eaton GBE KCB FEng FIEE
Sir Denys Henderson
Sir Bryan Nicholson.

I am pleased to say that Lord Wilson of Tillyorn has agreed to join the Committee. He had a distinguished career in the Diplomatic Service and served as Governor of Hong Kong. He has also had extensive experience of both business and academic life since his retirement.

The Advisory Committee advises me on applications from the most senior Crown Servants to take up business appointments after leaving the Service, and it also gives advice directly to former Ministers on appointments they wish to accept after leaving office. The members of the Committee are unpaid, and I am grateful to them for the time they give to this role.

HEALTH

Quality Protects

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the outcome of the evaluation of the Quality Protects Management Action Plans submitted to his Department by local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [118864]

Mr. Hutton: All local authorities with social services responsibilities submitted their Quality Protects Management Action Plans (MAPs) to the Department of Health by the end of January. The Social Services Inspectorate has now completed its evaluation of the MAPs, and I have considered their findings. I am pleased to announce that MAPs from all 150 local councils have reached an acceptable standard, with eight assessed as of particularly high quality. I have today written to the chief executives of the authorities to confirm that, subject to Parliamentary approval, they will receive payment of their allocation of the children's services special grant for 2000–01.

The eight MAPs that were assessed as being of particularly high quality were Blackpool, Manchester, Portsmouth, Stockton-on-Tees, Suffolk, Tameside, Westminster and Wandsworth.

Local authorities have made a good start over the past year in implementing Quality Protects, which is making a real difference to the lives of children in need and in particular looked after children. We must maintain that momentum to deliver lasting and continued improvements in the way in which children's services are managed and delivered in order to improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children.

Cancer

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the annual expenditure allocated by his Department to *(a)* the Christie Hospital and *(b)* the Royal Marsden Hospital for cancer care and treatment, in the last three years for which figures are available. [116109]

Mr. Denham: The total income for the Christie Hospital and the Royal Marsden Hospital for the years 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 is as follows:

£ million

	Christie Hospital	*Royal Marsden*
1996–97	51.6	65.7
1997–98	53.3	70.1
1998–99	57.3	74.8

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the annual income of *(a)* the Christie Hospital and *(b)* the Royal Marsden Hospital was derived from the provision of private health care services, in the last three years for which figures are available. [116112]

Mr. Denham: The proportion of the total annual income for the Christie Hospital and the Royal Marsden Hospital for the years 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 which has been derived from the provision of private health care services is as follows:

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Christie Hospital			
Total Income	51.6	53.3	57.3
Private Patients	2.6	2.8	3.7
Royal Marsden Hospital			
Total Income	65.7	70.1	74.8
Private Patients	11.7	13.4	15.5

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the annual Government funding for research into *(a)* breast cancer and *(b)* prostate cancer in each of the last two years. [117138]

Yvette Cooper: Our funding for cancer research is provided through a number of routes.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) is the main agency through which the Government support research on the causes and treatment of disease. The MRC receives most of its income via grant in aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The Department funds research to support policy development in health and social care, and to support effective practice in the National Health Service. The Department also provides NHS support funding for research commissioned by the MRC and charities that takes place in the NHS.

The approximate annual Government expenditure (Department of Health/NHS, MRC and other Government Departments—principally devolved health Departments) on breast cancer and prostate cancer are £9.33 million and £1.55 million respectively. These figures underestimate the total Government research expenditure in these areas, as detailed estimates of NHS support funding are not currently collected routinely.

Since 1997 the Government have committed an extra £800,000 to new research projects on prostate cancer, through the Medical Research Council and through the Department of Health. The Department has actively sought to support such work in prostate cancer, and has not rejected any high quality proposals for work in this area.

The Department recently announced £1 million additional new funding for this financial year for urgent research studies into prostate cancer as a mark of its concern over this disease.

Following the seminar last year at No. 10 a "Cancer Research Funders' Forum" has been established to help improve the co-ordination of cancer research in the United Kingdom. It is being run by the MRC and includes departmental representatives and the major cancer research charities. At the Department's request, the Forum considered the issue of prostate cancer at its first meeting on 10 January. They agreed to set up an expert group on prostate cancer, which will identify gaps in current research and suggest ways of filling them. The expert group met for the first time on 25 February, and expects to report within months.

We have recently appointed a National Cancer Director, Professor Mike Richards, who will spearhead our concerted drive on cancer. He will work in partnership with doctors, nurses, general practitioners, other health professionals and the voluntary sector to improve prevention and modernise cancer services to help ensure equitable access to high quality cancer care. This will include a close interest in the development and progression of research. The Government keep their priorities for research under review. In the NHS priorities are identified through widespread consultation with those using, delivering and managing services. They take account of the burden of disease, potential benefits and Government objectives as well as the responsibilities and work of other funders—including the charities.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the Government spent on treatments for *(a)* breast cancer and *(b)* prostate cancer in each of the last two years. [117139]

Yvette Cooper: Information showing expenditure on cancer treatment by cancer site is not available. However, cancer services are estimated to account for 6.3 per cent. (£1.5 billion) of National Health Service hospital expenditure in England. This excludes cancer services not normally provided on an in-patient basis, for example cancer screening, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and community palliative cancer services.

The Department has commissioned work to improve overall NHS information, including national statistics on hospital prescribing, which will give us a more accurate method of recording hospital expenditure on cancer treatment.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the use of taxanes in the treatment of ovarian and advanced breast cancer. [118325]

Yvette Cooper: The efficiency and effectiveness of taxanes is currently being assessed by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The process is still continuing but we expect the guidance to be issued shortly.

Consultants

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultants are employed in North East England; what strategy he has for dealing with shortages in the number of consultants; and how many were employed in each of the last five years. [117210]

Mr. Denham: The latest information about numbers of consultants in North East England is shown in the table.

Overall, there is no sign of a national shortage of consultants, and where there are problems, these are in certain specialties or in particular geographical areas. Numbers continue to rise steadily and difficulties in filling vacancies are not widespread.

At national level we aim to ensure that there are enough doctors in training for there to be sufficient becoming fully trained specialists to meet the future needs of the National Health Service. At local level, it is for NHS trusts and health authorities, who are accountable for the services they provide, to determine the number, grade and mix of staff they require, in the light of local circumstances, in order to provide quality services to patients.

On 6 April I announced plans to train 393 extra hospital specialists. Added to the specialist doctors already in training, there should be an additional 13,000 fully trained hospital specialists in the National Health Service by 2006–07. The additional places will take forward our plans to increase capacity in the NHS, so that patients have easier access to faster, fairer and more convenient services.

Hospital medical consultants employed in the North East of England

	Headcount
At 30 September	
1994	880
1995	1,280
1996	1,160
1997	1,210
1998	1,230

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
2. The North East of England is defined as the following Health Authorities: Northumberland, Newcastle and North Tyneside, Gateshead and South Tyneside, Sunderland, County Durham and Tees.
3. Before 1996 some hospital medical staff were employed directly by the Regional Health Authority and so may not be included in these figures.

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

Abortion

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the evidence-based guidelines, published on 13 March, by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, on the care of women seeking abortion will be implemented. [117684]

Yvette Cooper: This new guideline will be circulated to college members. We expect the guideline to be used as the basis of local protocols which are designed to promote the development of high quality services and take account of local needs and service provision. In addition, the guideline will be considered as part of the national sexual health strategy currently being developed.

Dental Services

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the rate of replacement of fillings and crowns in NHS dentistry in each of the last 10 years. [117853]

Mr. Hutton: During 1998–99, 387,777 fillings and 81,891 crowns or approximately 2 per cent. of treatments for fillings and crowns in England and Wales were replaced under paragraph 7 of the Terms of Service for Dentists (Schedule 1 of the National Health Service (General Dental Services) Regulation 1992).

Comparable information is not available for earlier years.

The percentage does not include fillings or crowns which are replaced in later courses of treatment on which information is not available.

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how time spent on advising patients on how to improve dental hygiene is reflected in dentists' remuneration. [117945]

Mr. Hutton: Time spent on advising patients on how to improve dental hygiene and maintain oral health is remunerated in a number of ways through the fee scales laid down in Determination I of the Statement of Dental Remuneration. Dentists are paid as follows:

monthly capitation payments for every registered patient under the age of 18 (item 41);

monthly continuing care payments for every registered patient aged over 18 (item 45);

fee for examination and report (item 1);

intensive instruction in the prevention of dental disease (item 6); and,

non-surgical treatment of periodontal disease (item 10).

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117811]

Ms Stuart: The Department employs no lawyers.

Legal services are supplied to the Department by the Department of Social Security through a Service Level Agreement. The number of lawyers employed by the Department of Social Security are set out in the answer of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security on 10 April 2000, *Official Report,* column 25W.

Waiting Times

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish on a regular basis information about waiting times between patients seeing a consultant and receiving in-patient treatment for each specialty at each NHS hospital. [118260]

Mr. Denham: This information is already available on a quarterly basis, as information on waiting times of patients who are waiting to be admitted to an National Health Service trust are published quarterly in *Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England,* copies of which are available in the Library. The latest data available relate to the quarter ended 31 December 1999.

Commission for Health Improvement

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what role the Commission for Health Improvement will play in inspecting and monitoring hospital performance in relation to *(a)* hygiene and the work of cleaning contractors, *(b)* nutritional standards for patients' food and catering contracts and *(c)* preventing and stopping cross-infection. [118382]

Yvette Cooper: The Commission for Health Improvement will provide robust, independent scrutiny of National Health Service arrangements to assure the quality of health care. Its clinical expertise will be brought to bear on the areas identified. It is recognised that there are also important non-clinical, organisational factors to be taken into account. Therefore the Commission will work closely with other external review and inspection bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive and the Audit Commission to ensure comprehensive monitoring of NHS hospitals.

Taxanes

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what guidelines he has issued to health authorities regarding the funding of taxanes; [118344]

(2) if he will list those health authorities which fund the prescribing of taxanes; [118347]

(3) if he will list the *(a)* spending on cancer drugs per head of population, *(b)* spending on cancer drugs as a percentage of total spending on cancer and *(c)* spending on cancer drugs as a percentage of total drugs expenditure, in (i) England, (ii) Scotland, (iii) Wales, (iv) Northern Ireland, (v) other EU countries, (vi) the USA and (vii) Japan, for each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [118343]

(4) when he expects to receive the final report from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence on taxanes. [118346]

Yvette Cooper: The most up-to-date guidance currently available to the National Health Service on the use of taxanes is included in "Improving Outcomes in Gynaecological Cancer". The efficiency and effectiveness of taxanes is currently being assessed by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The process is still continuing but we expect the guidance to be issued shortly.

Detailed spending information on cancer services, including drugs, is not currently held centrally, and it is not therefore possible to compare data for England with any other country. We do know that spending on cancer in-patient care is estimated to account for 6.3 per cent. (£1.5 billion) of National Health Service hospital expenditure. This figure does not cover spending on cancer services not provided on an in-patient basis including cancer screening, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and community palliative care services.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies his Department has made of the differences in the annual cost of treatment using beta interferon between the UK and other countries; and what factors are responsible for these differences. [118530]

Mr. Denham: The Department has made no studies of the cost of treatment in different countries. As far as the prices of the beta interferon medicines are concerned, the Department has information both from the manufacturers and from contacts in the health authorities of other countries. Direct comparisons of prices of products of this type are misleading because they are often supplied direct to hospitals, making list prices less significant. Furthermore some countries include distribution costs and some aspects of care within the list price while others account for them separately.

Subject to these qualifications, it can be said that in general the annual cost of beta interferons in the United Kingdom is slightly greater than in other European Union countries, reflecting currency movements since the products were introduced.

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason there is no neuro-specialist on the NICE Committee which is examining beta interferon. [118541]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence Technology Appraisal Committee consists of 24 standing members, appointed for three years which combines patient advocates, National Health Service clinicians and mangers, academic experts, and industry representation. However, the standing committee is supported by technology-specific clinical experts brought in for a particular intervention. When the committee appraises beta interferon the clinical experts will be neurologists.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on how beta interferon is targeted for use by MS suffers in the National Health Service; [118329]

(2) what representations he has received *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* against extending the availability of beta interferon to MS sufferers; and if he will make a statement; [118348]

(3) if he will estimate the number of MS sufferers who will potentially benefit from beta interferon in reducing *(a)* the progress of MS and *(b)* the number of MS relapses; and if he will make a statement; [118330]

(4) what plans he has to fund large-scale trials of beta interferon in the treatment of MS sufferers; and if he will make a statement. [118331]

Mr. Denham: We have asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to conduct an authoritative appraisal of beta interferon as part of its first appraisal programme. NICE is expected to report in the summer.

It would be premature to speculate on the number of multiple sclerosis sufferers who will potentially benefit from beta interferon when NICE has not yet come to a view on clinical and cost effectiveness.

Over the past 12 months the Department's records indicate receipt of approximately 1,000 written representations from hon. Members, patient groups and the public expressing concern about the current arrangements for prescribing and funding of beta interferon.

Guidance issued by the Department in 1995, Executive Letter (95)97, recommends that health authorities should have in place arrangements for hospital specialists to initiate treatment in the light of medical evidence and local priorities.

Oncology Drugs

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the allocation of investment to health authority budgets for oncology drugs. [118324]

Yvette Cooper: Funding for oncology drugs is not identified separately within allocations made to health authorities. Improving cancer services is one of the National Health Services top priorities for action, and health authorities and primary care groups will need to take this into account in allocating resources.

We have made clear in a letter to all health authority chief executives that the extra £600 million allocated to the Health Service for 2000–01 will, in part, be used to meet any additional costs arising from implementation of recommendations by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

Pathogenesis

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the identifiable causes of *(a)* ME, *(b)* MS and *(c)* HIV/AIDS. [118585]

Yvette Cooper: The causes of myalgic encephalomyelitis also known as chronic fatigue syndrome are not known. A large number of different disorders have been put forward or implicated in trying to identify its causes. These range from biochemical and immunological disorders and various viruses including the Epstein Barr virus (glandular fever). It seems possible that the syndrome represents a spectrum of illnesses, some of which will have an unidentified physical cause.

The causes of multiple sclerosis are not known. However, there is some evidence to suggest cause may be linked to environmental factors. A 1993 British Society of Rehabilitation Medicine Working Party Report on MS notes that the prevalence of MS is related to geographical latitudes, being higher in the north of Britain than in the South. The best evidence to date reports a prevalence rising from 99 per 100,000 of the population in Southampton to 178 per 100,000 of the population in North East Scotland.

There is an international scientific consensus that infection with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the cause of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). This understanding is based on worldwide studies of individuals with AIDS, populations known to be at risk of AIDS, as well as studies of the virus itself.

NHS Staff (East Somerset)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* nurses, *(b)* doctors, *(c)* consultants and *(d)* midwives were employed by the (i) East Somerset Health Authority and (ii) Yeovil district hospital in each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [118639]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The information requested is shown in the table.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): nursing and midwifery staff and hospital medical staff, within Somerset Health Authority, and for East Somerset NHS Trust, for each year as at 30 September

Number (headcount)

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Somerset Health Authority [1]							
Nursing staff	3,330	3,440	3,500	3,180	2,780	2,610	2,560
All hospital medical staff[2]	310	320	350	400	410	440	460
Consultants	80	100	120	130	130	140	150
Midwifery staff	190	190	200	190	180	180	190
East Somerset NHS Trust							
Nursing staff	850	850	870	930	750	700	750
All hospital medical staff[2]	100	90	110	120	120	140	140
Consultants	30	20	30	40	40	40	40
Midwifery staff	70	60	70	50	70	60	70

[1] Somerset Health Authority includes Somerset Health Authority, Avalon, Somerset NHS Trust, East Somerset NHS Trust and Taunton and Somerset NHS Trust.
[2] Hospital medical staff includes all doctors working in hospitals within the HCHS sector.
Notes:
1. 1992, 1993 and 1994 figures include agency staff and exclude learners.
2. 1995 to 1998 figures exclude agency staff and learners.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
4. A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995. Information based on this classification is not directly comparable with earlier years.
Sources:
1. Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census.
2. Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census.

Cleaning and Hygiene Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate *(a)* how many and *(b)* what percentage of hospitals have contracted out cleaning and hygiene services for clinical areas to private operators; how many had done so before 1 May 1997; and how many have done so since 1 May 1997. [118517]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 200]:* The information is not collected centrally. Trust chief executives are responsible for standards of cleanliness and hygiene in hospitals. Hospitals contract out provision of cleaning services, or provide them in-house. Regardless of the method of provision, the services provided should meet appropriate standards and provide best value. To help trusts meet appropriate standards we will be publishing later this month "Standards for Environmental Cleanliness in Hospitals", developed by the Infection Control Nurses Association and the Association of Domestic Managers.

Dentists (Pay)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to include dental therapists in a pay review body; and if he will make a statement. [118518]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Our proposals for modernising National Health Service pay which were published in February 1999 in "Agenda for Change", include bringing some groups of highly qualified staff within the scope of the Nursing Pay Review Body, without changing its fundamentally professional character.

Initial discussions with NHS trade unions on pay modernisation resulted in a joint Framework of Principles and Agreed Statement on the Way Forward which was published on 8 October 1999. Para 7.2 of the Joint Framework sets out the following starting point for more detailed discussions with trade unions on the qualifying criteria for groups to come within the scope of the NPRB:

> Professions with a minimum entry requirement of three years educational study (or equivalent) to diploma level or higher, in a health specific area (other than medicine or dentistry) and which are state registered and have a substantial majority of members employed in health care.
>
> Exceptions might be agreed for staff groups which met the majority but not all of these conditions
>
> Staff groups which support professions added to the NPRB remit, and who have a direct connection with the transferred groups similar to that between nursing auxiliaries and registered nurses would also need to be considered for transfer.

I am sure the hon. Member will appreciate that as this is part of continuing confidential discussions with NHS Unions aimed at reaching agreement by summer 2000, I am unable to comment further at this stage.

Re-branding Exercise

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what will be the cost of the re-branding exercise *(a)* across the NHS and *(b)* by region. [118670]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Adoption of the national National Health Service mark is being undertaken as items come up for replacement in the normal course of business. As a result, no NHS organisation has been required to undertake any additional work and no additional costs to NHS organisations are envisaged. New NHS organisations formed as the result of mergers will save money by adoption of the existing mark rather than having to invest in designing a new logo.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health by what date the re-branding exercise in the NHS has to be completed. [118669]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Health authorities have been asked to start using the existing National Health Service mark by January 2000, and NHS trusts by April 2001. No deadline has been set for NHS organisations to apply the NHS mark universally.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the cost of materials which will become obsolete through the re-branding of the NHS. [118733]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* No items will become obsolete through the re-branding of the National Health Service. Materials will be ordered in the new style only when they come up for replacement in the normal course of business.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the items used by the NHS on which the new NHS logo is to be placed. [118668]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The National Health Service mark should be used on any item which previously displayed an NHS trust or health authority logo. Items will be ordered in the new style only when they come up for replacement in the normal course of business.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what level of cost savings he estimates the re-branding exercise for the NHS will entail. [118671]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* New National Health Service organisations (formed to modernise the service—such as primary care groups and trusts—or as a result of mergers) have saved money by adopting the existing NHS mark rather than having to invest in designing new logos. Over time, further savings will be generated for the rest of the NHS as a common design standard enables the service to negotiate economies of scale with suppliers. The level of cost-saving depends on local turnover of stock within the NHS: items are being replaced in the new style only when they come up for replacement in the normal course of business.

Hospital Readmissions

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients aged 75 years and over were readmitted as an emergency within 28 days of discharge for each quarter since 1998–99; and what percentage of discharges this represents. [118687]

Ms Stuart: The table shows the number of patients aged 75 years and over who were readmitted as an emergency within 28 days of discharge for each quarter since 1998–99; and the percentage of discharges this represents.

The number and percentage of patients aged 75 and over who were readmitted as an emergency within 28 days of discharge each quarter since 1998–99

	Patients aged 75 and over who are readmitted as an emergency within 28 days of discharge	
Quarter	*Number of readmissions*	*As percentage of all discharges*
1998–99		
Q1	29,506	8.6
Q2	29,076	8.1
Q3	29,110	8.0
Q4	29,933	8.1

The number and percentage of patients aged 75 and over who were readmitted as an emergency within 28 days of discharge each quarter since 1998–99

	Patients aged 75 and over who are readmitted as an emergency within 28 days of discharge	
Quarter	*Number of readmissions*	*As percentage of all discharges*
1999–2000		
Q1	26,724	7.7
Q2	26,758	7.2
Q3	26,525	7.1

Source:

NHS Executive Quarterly Monitoring Activity

The information given is collected by health authorities and returned to the National Health Service Executive as part of the quarterly monitoring process. It includes all specialties except psychiatry and learning disability.

Mental Health Act (Charges)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent guidance he has given to local authorities about charging people receiving services under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983; what estimate he has made of the number of *(a)* local authorities charging people receiving services under section 117 and *(b)* people being charged for services under section 117; what estimate he has made of the cost of compensating people incorrectly charged for services under section 117; what estimate he has made of the cost to local authorities of abolishing charges for services under section 117; and if he will make a statement. [118795]

Mr. Hutton: On 10 February 2000 the Department issued a circular to local authorities and health authorities in England drawing attention to the High Court judgment in the case of R *v.* London Borough of Richmond ex parte Watson (HSC 2000/003: LAC (2000)3). Local authorities still charging for services provided as part of after-care under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983 were advised that they should immediately cease to do so. The Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) has carried out a survey of local authorities in England and Wales with the aim of identifying how many local authorities charge for section 117 after-care services and the estimated costs of providing such services free of charge. We understand that the results have not been published.

Wheelchairs

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will announce the conclusions of his assessment of the recommendations of the evaluation study by the University of York Health Economics Consortium of the Powered Wheelchair and Voucher Scheme initiatives. [118792]

Mr. Hutton: The report of the evaluation conducted by the York Health Economics Consortium reached two major conclusions. First, additional funds were needed if the electrically powered indoor/outdoor wheelchair (EPIOCs) scheme is to meet its objectives fully. Secondly,

the voucher scheme had largely met its broad objectives of improving choice but relatively few wheelchair users had benefited from it when the evaluation was conducted. The report recommended that continuation of the voucher scheme should be a matter for local discretion. However, since then the take-up of vouchers has risen steadily.

We have committed ourselves to ending the variations in health care provision across the country. For that reason, we could not agree that voucher schemes should become discretionary. We want all disabled people to be able to exercise choice. We therefore announced on 29 March that the current funding level of £14 million for powered wheelchairs and voucher schemes will be made recurrent from 1 April. We decided that:

(i) continued allocation of £14 million should be free of distinctions between what should be spent on powered wheelchairs or voucher schemes, and that health authorities and provider services should consult with service users and take a flexible approach to ensuring this money meets local needs and priorities in wheelchair services; and:

(ii) that all services should continue to operate a voucher scheme which offers users a choice in having a wheelchair which meets their needs.

On 29 March we placed the York Health Economics Consortium's report on the National Health Services internet site to ensure service commissioners and providers have access to it.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to continue the provision of ring-fenced funds for the EPIOC scheme and the wheelchair voucher scheme on the same basis as in 1996. [118797]

Mr. Hutton: Funds were ring-fenced between 1996–2000 to phase in £50 million for the electrically powered indoor/outdoor chairs (EPIOCs) and voucher schemes. Guidance indicated that funding level in the final year, 1999–2000, would become recurrent in National Health Service baseline budgets.

On 29 March I announced plans to allocate to health authorities £14 million for EPIOCs and the wheelchair voucher scheme in 2000–01. This sum is some £6 million greater than that provided in 1996–97. The money will be added recurrently to health authority baselines rather than on a one year at a time basis as in the past, to secure the long-term future of both schemes. Also, health authorities will now be able to use the money flexibly to meet the needs and preferences of local service users, whether that be for EPIOCs, vouchers, or other wheelchair service priorities.

Day Centres

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the charges made by each local authority in England and Wales for attendance at day centres for the physically disabled in each financial year since 1997. [118796]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the charges made by each local authority in England for attendance at day centres for the physically disabled is not collected centrally. However information on the recoupment of fees and charges by each local authority is available at the Department of Health website at www.doh.gov.uk/public/pss—stat.htm.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Bovine TB

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on variations in the susceptibility of cattle to TB infection. [118508]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* There is no such research in place at present, but this is one of the issues being considered by the TB Husbandry Panel, which is due to report shortly.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the *(a)* terms of reference and *(b)* financial resources available to the TB Husbandry Panel. [118514]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The aim of the Husbandry Panel is to identify current or future farm management (husbandry) measures which will assist in developing a sustainable policy to control TB in cattle, and its terms of reference are:

The Panel will assess the scientific evidence on the effects of cattle husbandry in relation to Bovine TB, and in particular:

a. review the available literature;

b. take oral and/or written evidence from interested parties, especially those with expertise in cattle farming and TB risk factors, to identify the current expert opinion on best practice.

Taking account of the epidemiological investigations launched by MAFF following consultation with the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB, the Panel will, within three months of appointment, produce a report which summarises the state of knowledge on the effects of husbandry on controlling bovine TB, and which:

a. identifies approaches being taken by research and development funders which will fill gaps in knowledge and their relative timescales;

b. makes recommendations on the steps and responsibility which need to be taken to encourage careful management practices relating to tuberculosis in cattle;

c. makes recommendations on how best to evaluate husbandry measures for future use, including advice on whether husbandry experiments are justifiable at this stage, and if so, which experiments might be most promising at this stage.

The budget for the Husbandry Panel is £45,083 which is to cover the costs of the secretariat, the Panel's expenses and other associated costs.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the report of the TB Husbandry Panel and if, following receipt, he will publish it in full. [118507]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The Panel is expected to report at the end of April. The report will be published in full.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the current research projects associated with Bovine TB, indicating for each the cost in 2000–01 and the total cost for the project. [118515]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The current bovine TB research projects, together with total cost and costs for 2000–01 are shown in the table.

£

Research project	Cost 2000–01	Total cost
A spatial analysis using GIS risk factors associated with TB incidents in cattle herds in England and Wales	43,354	188,373
Ecological correlates of tuberculosis incidence in cattle	123,779	374,181
Multivariate analysis of risk factors affecting tuberculosis incidents in cattle herds—phase 1	34,370	137,479
Improved diagnostics for cattle	170,449	511,347
Quantification of the risk of transmission of bovine TB from badgers to cattle within localised areas	55,196	167,504
Integrated modelling of *M. bovis* transmission in badgers and cattle	265,043	890,769
Detection and enumeration of *M. bovis* from clinical and environmental samples	88,178	297,046
The risk to cattle from *M. bovis* infection in wildlife species other than badgers	272,348	960,052
The risk to cattle from wildlife species other than badgers in areas of high herd breakdown risk	149,128	591,035
Development and evaluation of strain typing methods for *M. bovis*	305,346	1,124,682
Understanding the route of TB transmission from badgers to cattle	133,471	266,941
Developing innovative methods to estimate badger population density	240,082	882,089
An integrated study of perturbation, population estimation, modelling and risk	299,323	1,252,592
Novel methods of estimating badger numbers in the wider countryside	63,604	230,424
Genome sequence analysis of *M. bovis*	51,828	875,101
Antigen presenting cells and T cell responses to Mycobacterium	400,000	1,200,000
Generation of vaccine candidates against *M. bovis*	313,201	1,566,005
Testing of vaccine candidates for bovine tuberculosis using a low dose aerosol challenge guinea pig model	196,753	1,068,045
Development of badger vaccines	101,865	304,250
Development of badger immunological reagents	139,826	419,560
Development of a turf model to assess the biological control of *M. bovis* using Mycobacteriphage	20,000	80,000
Testing TB vaccines in cattle	263,642	1,316,635
A molecular genetic analysis of badger social structure and bovine TB	162,451	766,069
The potential of ticks as vectors of *Mycobacterium bovis*	49,942	49,942
Ecological consequences of removing badgers from an ecosystem	254,240	1,216,016

In addition substantial new research into the pathogenesis of *M. bovis* in cattle will be carried out in 2000–01 and succeeding years/ Detailed protocols are being developed and precise costings are not yet available.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will request the TB Forum to consider requiring the TB status of individual animals to be included in the cattle movement recording system. [118424]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The TB Forum has already discussed this issue which has significant practical implications. The Forum is considering whether the objective could be achieved by simpler means.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the risks of TB infection from slurry spreading practices. [118509]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* There is no such research in place at present, but this is one of the issues being considered by the TB Husbandry Panel, which is due to report shortly.

Mobile Phone Networks

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the benefits which the roll-out of mobile phone networks in rural areas will bring to farmers. [117690]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have been asked to reply.

No assessment has been made. However, mobile phones have clear potential benefits for rural communities, including farmers, by improving communications, particularly in isolated situations, and giving users greater freedom and flexibility in work and leisure.

BSE

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is on the compulsory testing of cattle for BSE. [118319]

Ms Quin: There is no validated test for the detection of BSE in live cattle. Nor is there a validated post-mortem test for the detection of sub-clinical infection. Until such tests are available compulsory testing of cattle will be restricted to the testing of cattle notified to the Department in accordance with the BSE (No. 2) Order 1996.

From 1 January 2001 the UK will commence testing of approximately 7,000 cattle per year after death in compliance with recently agreed Commission proposals on epidemio-surveillance.

Meat and Livestock Commission (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received on setting up a separate meat and livestock commission for Wales; and if he will make a statement. [118404]

Ms Quin: None.

Under the terms of a Marketing Services Agreement signed in 1997, Agriculture Ministers have already consented to the delegation of certain Meat and Livestock Commission functions in Wales. This includes the promotion of Welsh livestock and livestock products by Welsh Lamb and Beef Promotions Ltd.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to increase the amount of EU agrimonetary compensation paid to dairy farmers in the UK. [118524]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 30 March that £22 million would be paid this year only in agrimonetary compensation to the dairy sector. This represents all the agrimonetary compensation available to this sector, including the 50 per cent. UK contribution.

Primates

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provisions have been made to deal with the potential for zoonotic infections on import of primates carried on the Cap Afrique; and if the veterinary surgeon charged with checking the health and wellbeing of the primates was the purchaser of them. [116341]

Ms Quin: The Department is responsible for licensing the import of primates into quarantine against rabies in premises authorised by the Department. Licence applications do not require the applicant to identify themselves as the purchaser or owner of the animals to be imported or as the purchaser's or owner's agent. Quarantine premises must employ a veterinary supervisor authorised by the Department to be responsible for the health of the imported animals. Employers of staff who work with simians must take account of their general duties under health and safety legislation and consider the risks from zoonoses that may affect staff and take suitable precautions to prevent or control exposure.

Over-30-months Scheme

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will set a target date for the introduction of the increase in the maximum weight per animal on which compensation is payable under the over-30-months scheme. [117687]

Ms Quin: The Government have made a commitment to seek an increase in the maximum weight per animal on which compensation is payable under the Over-30-Months Scheme. Implementation of such a change is dependent on the Commission's willingness to make an appropriate proposal and on support from other member states. We will be pressing for early action but the timing is not within our control.

Hedgerows

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will seek to amend the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy in respect of the measurement of field margins, in order to ensure that such rules take account of the character of Britain's hedgerows; and if he will make a statement. [117836]

Ms Quin: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) on 29 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 172W.

Fallen Stock

Mr. Gray: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the number of incinerators owned by hunts that are used for the disposal of fallen stock; and how many hunts *(a)* charge and *(b)* do not charge for this service. [117959]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* No estimate has been made by the Department of the number of incinerators owned by hunts that are used for the disposal of fallen stock. However, if Specified Risk Material is to be incinerated, the incinerator must be approved by the appropriate Minister. There are 159 such incinerators at hunt kennels in Great Britain. Information on hunts' charging policy is not collected by the Department.

British Farm Standards Label

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he will employ to ensure that the independent verifiers of the new British farm standards apply appropriate tests to create consumer confidence in this label. [118624]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The Government are not directly responsible for this, but are encouraging the NFU (National Farmers' Union) who are developing the new mark, "British Farm Standard". The NFU intend that the mark should only appear on food which meets the requirements of a qualifying farm assurance scheme. We understand that one requirement on the assurance schemes will be that they should have obtained UKAS (United Kingdom Accreditation Service) accreditation or have a plan in place to achieve it. UKAS accreditation can only be obtained if all participants are subject to independent verification. Through verification, participants are subject to regular inspection which will ensure that they meet the high standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental responsibility as well as other conditions of production that are required by the assurance schemes. The NFU intend to explain to consumers these key values which will underpin the mark.

CABINET OFFICE

Government Car and Despatch Agency

Mrs. Butler: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she has concluded her review of the Government Car and Despatch Agency. [119096]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The triennial review of the Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA), the start of which I announced on 27 October 1999, has now been completed. The Cabinet Office, assisted by Lorien consultants, has considered the Agency's performance since 1 April 1997, when it was launched, and the options for the future of its functions.

The principal aim of the GCDA, which comprises the Government Car Service (GCS) and the Inter Despatch Service (IDS), is to provide secure, reliable, value for money services to its customers. The evaluation of GCDA's performance over its first three years concluded that it has performed well. It has met 14 of 15 key performance targets (including all of its financial and efficiency and productivity targets) set and completed during the period. The evaluation concluded that it had succeeded in meeting its principal aims and objectives, and made a number of recommendations for structural improvements allowing it greater freedom to pursue its commercial objectives. I have placed copies of the executive summary of the evaluation report in the Libraries of the Houses.

The review of the standard options (continued agency status, market testing and contracting out, privatisation, abolition) considered each business separately. It concluded that the high security requirements of customers and the unique nature of the services provided by GCS meant that it was not suitable for private sector involvement. It went on to propose a programme of modernisation aimed at improving the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of its services. The review recommended that the IDS should establish and develop, through a Public Private Partnership, a secure, flexible, value for money, nationwide service to complement its existing London and dedicated networks.

I have considered both reports and I have decided that GCDA should continue as an executive agency for a period of five years. It will implement the programme of reform recommended by this review which will build upon its success over the past three years, and enable the Agency to deliver the high quality, value for money services its customers require. A revision to the Framework Document will now be prepared and published.

Anti-drugs Strategy (Meetings)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many times the Deputy to the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator has met members and officials of the United States Government since 1 January 1999; on what date and where each meeting took place; and which members and officials of the United States Government attended each meeting. [117063]

Mr. Ian McCartney: During the period 1 January 1999 to 31 March 2000, the Deputy UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator met General Barry McCaffrey, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and his officials, during their visit to the United Kingdom in October 1999. In addition to meetings with General McCaffrey, he also sat in on several bilateral meetings between US and UK officials to discuss a wide range of drugs related issues, including Criminal justices intervention issues and drug treatment programmes.

Lord Levy

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer of 28 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 76W, if she will list the meetings between Lord Levy and *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials within her Department on Government business other than in his capacity as the Prime Minister's personal envoy delivering messages in the Middle East. [117783]

Mr. Stringer: To the best of my knowledge, no Minister or senior official in the Cabinet Office has had a meeting with Lord Levy since 1 May 1997 on Government business. This does not include social engagements.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Crown Office List

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the review of the Crown Office List will be published. [119131]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department has today published the Review of the Crown Office List. The Review was chaired by Sir Jeffery Bowman. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Judges

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if the Lord Chancellor has completed his review of the terms of service of part-time judicial office-holders in England and Wales following the judgment of the High Court of Justiciary in Scotland in the Starrs case. [119130]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, and the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland and the Lord Chancellor have agreed new arrangements for part-time judicial appointments for which the Lord Chancellor is responsible. We accord the highest value to the maintenance of judicial independence for all judges, full-time and part-time, and the arrangements have been fashioned for that purpose.

I am placing in the Library of the House two joint statements signed by the Lord Chancellor and by the Lord Chief Justices setting out these changes for the following appointments in ordinary Courts in England and Wales:

Recorders,

Deputy District Judges,

Acting Stipendiary Magistrates,

Deputy Masters or Registrars of the Supreme Court,

Deputy High Court Judges,

Deputy Circuit Judges,

Retired Lords of Appeal in Ordinary, Lords Justices and High Court Judges;

and the following appointments in Northern Ireland:

Deputy Resident magistrate,

Deputy County Court Judge,

Deputy District Judge,

Retired Law Lords, Lord Justices and High Court Judges.

The Lord Chancellor has also decided that no useful purpose is served by retaining the separate offices of Assistance Recorder and Recorder and he will, accordingly, be recommending to Her Majesty that all serving Assistant Recorders should be appointed Recorders. In future, appointments will be made direct to Recordership through an openly advertised selection procedure.

I am also placing in the Library of the House joint statements signed by the Lord Chancellor and by the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales covering the following fixed-term appointments to Tribunals:

Part-time Immigration Adjudicators

Part-time members of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal

Part-time members of the Income and Corporation Taxes Tribunal

Part-time members of the Lands Tribunal

Part-time members of the Pensions Appeal Tribunals

Deputy Social Security and Child Support Commissioners

Part-time Special Commissioners of Income Tax

Part-time members of the Appeals Service (social security)

Part-time Chairmen of the VAT and Duties Tribunal.

The Secretary of State for Social Security and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have placed similar statements in the Libraries covering the following appointments for which they are ministerially responsible:

Secretary of State for Social Security

Pensions Ombudsman

Members of the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority

Chancellor of the Exchequer

Members of the VAT and Duties Tribunal.

These changes will come into effect immediately.

At a later stage, there will be a further announcement about the detailed aspects of these Tribunal arrangements as they will operate in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales following consultation with the devolved administrations.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Public Sector (Advisory Group on Openness)

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will accept the recommendations made in the report of the Advisory Group on Openness in the Public Sector. [119124]

Mr. Straw: I set up the Advisory Group on Openness in the Public Sector last year to advise me on how I might facilitate a cultural change to greater openness in the public sector. The Advisory Group reported to me in December and I have carefully considered both the report and its recommendations.

The recommendations address the practical matters necessary to bring about cultural change and to implement a Freedom of Information Act. They set out a broad agenda for action which I am happy to endorse in full. I shall be looking to see how we can best give effect to that agenda and I commend the report and recommendations to all public authorities which will be brought within scope of the freedom of information regime described in the Freedom of Information Bill now before Parliament. A copy of the report has been placed in the Library and is also available on the Home Office website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Police Firearms

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the most recent statistics available for the police use of firearms. [119125]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The statistics for April 1998 to March 1999 show that the number of police operations in which firearms were issued to officers was 10,928, a fall of over 7 per cent. on the previous year. The number of firearms incidents in which firearms were discharged by police was five, compared to three the previous year. There were no fatalities.

There was an increase of 3 per cent. to 7,791 in the number of operations in which armed response vehicles were deployed. Firearms were carried in these vehicles, but were not necessarily issued to officers on each occasion.

Full details are set out in the tables.

Number of operations in which firearms were issued

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Total	8,726	12,379	11,842	10,928
Avon and Somerset	326	312	139	88
Bedfordshire	264	345	323	260
Cambridgeshire	47	54	96	43
Cheshire	219	288	216	299
Cleveland	487	1,026	103	35
City of London	275	308	307	147
Cumbria	54	72	68	52
Derbyshire	72	109	147	176
Devon and Cornwall	90	160	133	61
Dorset	36	36	54	69
Durham	111	131	103	114
Essex	267	331	505	590
Gloucestershire	33	41	51	52
Greater Manchester	142	214	165	160
Hampshire	190	245	217	129
Hertfordshire	47	96	82	75
Humberside	92	291	472	317
Kent	82	236	423	92
Lancashire	227	333	338	616
Leicestershire	138	155	89	109
Lincolnshire	25	58	52	57
Merseyside	280	671	675	484
Metropolitan	2,178	2,439	2,578	2,742
Norfolk	96	166	128	185
Northamptonshire	54	64	77	51
Northumbria	452	1,360	823	683
North Yorkshire	52	65	102	69
Nottinghamshire	57	84	306	266
South Yorkshire	225	155	302	135
Staffordshire	80	257	240	209
Suffolk	150	180	193	174
Surrey	70	133	87	60
Sussex	445	235	330	123
Thames Valley	96	215	227	158
Warwickshire	55	97	152	291
West Mercia	59	106	132	130
West Midlands	226	270	227	305
West Yorkshire	657	617	630	662
Wiltshire	26	26	26	24
Dyfed Powys	11	17	27	38
Gwent	47	89	86	64
North Wales	117	233	310	386
South Wales	69	59	101	148

Number of Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs)

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Total	6,554	6,738	6,585	6,308
Avon and Somerset	157	165	161	153
Bedfordshire	48	46	42	50
Cambridgeshire	92	90	80	80
Cheshire	84	70	82	70
Cleveland	65	86	84	78
City of London	120	88	81	55
Cumbria	100	108	122	98
Derbyshire	130	110	100	87
Devon and Cornwall	140	151	147	82
Dorset	75	74	72	72
Durham	103	138	144	96
Essex	203	228	217	235
Gloucestershire	85	82	84	79
Greater Manchester	186	209	182	217
Hampshire	104	106	112	110
Hertfordshire	43	42	41	43
Humberside	104	90	102	102
Kent	144	150	150	130

Number of Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs)

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Lancashire	138	132	125	132
Leicestershire	105	104	94	90
Lincolnshire	81	82	85	75
Merseyside	119	147	165	121
Metropolitan	1,915	2,035	1,971	1,951
Norfolk	99	98	102	109
Northamptonshire	95	92	92	92
Northumbria	160	173	126	123
North Yorkshire	134	108	95	83
Nottinghamshire	126	128	129	120
South Yorkshire	125	110	108	90
Staffordshire	80	78	86	92
Suffolk	70	82	96	101
Surrey	79	76	61	69
Sussex	149	180	146	156
Thames Valley	175	185	194	179
Warwickshire	50	41	38	44
West Mercia	153	155	159	139
West Midlands	87	88	95	92
West Yorkshire	150	131	114	128
Wiltshire	145	134	105	88
Dyfed Powys	57	70	71	67
Gwent	55	70	59	64
North Wales	70	72	90	97
South Wales	154	134	176	169

Number of operations involving Armed Response Vehicles (ARVs)

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Total	5,523	8,060	7,544	7,791
Avon and Somerset	200	247	121	83
Bedfordshire	239	309	285	240
Cambridgeshire	15	23	19	27
Cheshire	180	240	166	247
Cleveland	465	1,014	[1]57	29
City of London	23	25	34	32
Cumbria	44	64	43	38
Derbyshire	53	97	99	153
Devon and Cornwall	21	77	58	43
Dorset	22	28	50	66
Durham	38	62	85	84
Essex	155	218	180	285
Gloucestershire	10	13	48	49
Greater Manchester	6	[2]—	56	43
Hampshire	159	208	170	114
Hertfordshire	20	35	25	26
Humberside	35	284	437	277
Kent	42	208	212	74
Lancashire	187	320	321	596
Leicestershire	101	126	68	109
Lincolnshire	21	39	34	42
Merseyside	239	618	559	396
Metropolitan	1,025	790	954	1,573
Norfolk	80	152	117	167
Northamptonshire	3	20	29	32
Northumbria	325	715	515	503
North Yorkshire	0	13	52	30
Nottinghamshire	44	66	[1]256	246
South Yorkshire	171	129	252	115
Staffordshire	70	235	206	185
Suffolk	117	120	135	104
Surrey	47	52	76	46
Sussex	413	173	284	[1]0
Thames Valley	73	164	184	139
Warwickshire	54	91	127	220
West Mercia	39	77	98	99
West Midlands	98	103	102	129
West Yorkshire	587	584	586	630
Wiltshire	1	23	21	17

Number of operations involving Armed Response Vehicles (ARVs)

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Dyfed Powys	6	12	19	30
Gwent	39	58	47	39
North Wales	14	173	260	298
South Wales	42	55	97	136

[1] These forces have changed the counting method for incidents to which ARVs are deployed

[2] No figures available

Security Service Tribunal

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements have been made following the expiry of the terms of appointment of the members of the Security Service Tribunal on 18 December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [119126]

Mr. Straw: Lord Justice Mummery has been appointed as President of the Tribunal for a period of five years, following his predecessor's acceptance of an appointment to the post of Security Service Commissioner. Sheriff John McInnes has been re-appointed as Vice-President of the Tribunal and both he and Sir Richard Gaskell have been re-appointed to the Tribunal for a further period of five years.

Lord Justice Simon Brown, formerly president of the Security Service Tribunal, has accepted an appointment as the Security Service Commissioner for a period of three years from 1 April 2000.

Fire Service

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received the recommendations of the inquiry into the machinery for determining firefighters' conditions of service. [119127]

Mr. Straw: Professor Burchill, who undertook the inquiry has submitted to me a number of recommendations for improving the working of the National Joint Council for Local Authorities' Fire Brigades. These include proposals which would involve the acceptance by the employees and the union of conciliation and arbitration, in the event of disputes, a clarification of procedures, a streamlining of the negotiation arrangements, and an independent Chair for the National Joint Council.

Implementation of these recommendations would be a matter for the National Joint Council rather than for the Government itself. I am, therefore, consulting the employers and the union, and with other interested parties, to confirm that they are willing to accept the proposals and to give them effect. I expect to announce the outcome of these consultations and to publish Professor Burchill's report early next month.

I am extremely grateful to Professor Burchill for the time and effort he has given to the inquiry, the way he has conducted it and the extent of common understanding and agreement he has already been able to achieve.

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has reached a decision on the bids for notional credit approvals under the second round of the private finance initiative for the Fire Service. [119128]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We received indicative bids from ten fire authorities for notional credit approvals under this second Private Finance Initiative (PFI) round for the fire service.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today decided that notional credit approvals for 2001–02 should be set aside in respect of indicative bids from the fire authorities for:

Tyne and Wear (Phase one of its proposed scheme)

West Midlands

Dorset

Mid and West Wales.

It will now be for those authorities to prepare an outline business case. Confirmation of the credit approvals will be given only on completion of such a business case demonstrating that PFI is the most cost-effective solution for the projects concerned, and on approval of the inter-departmental Project Review Group.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has also decided that he will be prepared to consider further the indicative bids from Tyne and Wear (Phase two) and London once decisions on provision of notional credit approvals for 2002–03 have been taken.

We shall be in touch with all those authorities whose bids were not selected on this occasion to offer guidance on how the bids might be developed and resubmitted in any future bidding rounds.

Kerb Crawling

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to make kerb crawling an arrestable offence. [119129]

Mr. Straw: I am very aware of the nuisance caused by the activities of kerb crawlers. The Government agree that a specific power of arrest would assist the police in dealing with this problem. I intend to include this proposal in the draft of a police and private security Bill, on which we will be consulting later this session, and which we will introduce at the earliest legislative opportunity.

Cybercrime Convention

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress with the Cybercrime Convention. [117521]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 21 October 1999, *Official Report,* columns 621–22W, which remains valid as a description of the state of play.

At the request of the United Kingdom and some other member states, it has been agreed with our Council of Europe partners that the draft convention should be made publicly available and we expect it to be released shortly. We plan to consult relevant interests, including industry, and will place a copy of the draft convention in the Library.

Prisons (Disabled People)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to adapt prisons to conform to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [118793]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service has accepted that its policies should conform to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Prison Service has already put in place policies, practices and procedures to prevent discrimination, and to provide auxiliary aids or services to facilitate disabled prisoners' and visitors' access to services. A Working Group has been set up to consider what needs to be done to conform with the requirement of the Act to remove or alter physical barriers to disabled persons' access to services.

Asylum Seekers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000, together with estimates he has made for the year 2000–01 *(a)* the number of applications for asylum made in each year, *(b)* the number of dependants of applicants for asylum applying in each year, *(c)* the number of asylum seekers and dependants being supported at cost to public funds, *(d)* the costs to public funds of supporting asylum seekers and their dependants, including costs relating to unaccompanied children, (1) in total, (2) per head of population, (3) per income tax payer, (4) per household and (5) as a percentage of total Government expenditure and *(e)* the cost to public funds of administration associated with asylum seekers and their dependants, (A) in total, (B) per head of population, (C) per income tax payer, (D) per household and (E) as a percentage of total Government expenditure. [118802]

Mrs. Roche: The available figures are given in the table:

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Asylum applications	33,855	51,255	[1]76,062	n/a
Dependants	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Asylum seekers and dependants being supported by public funds	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Costs to public funds of supporting asylum seekers and their dependants [3]				
Total (£ million)	375	475	597	n/a
Per head of population[4] (£)	6.38	8.08	10.15	n/a
Per income tax payer[4] (£)	13.44	17.03	21.40	n/a
Per household[4] (£)	15.50	19.63	24.67	n/a
Percentage of total Government expenditure[4]	0.12	0.14	0.17	n/a

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Costs to public funds of administration associated with asylum seekers and their dependants[5]				
Total (£ million)	215	209	[6]260	n/a
Per head of population[4] (£)	3.66	3.55	4.42	n/a
Per income tax payer[4] (£)	7.71	7.49	9.32	n/a
Per household[4] (£)	8.88	8.64	10.74	n/a
Percentage of total Government expenditure[4]	0.07	0.06	0.08	n/a

[1] Includes an estimated figure for March 2000.
[2] Only available for calendar years.
[3] Including costs associated with unaccompanied children.
[4] The estimated figure for the UK population is 58.8 million, the estimated number of tax payers is 27.9 million and the estimated number of households is 24.2 million. The total managed public expenditure in 1997–98 was 322.1 billion, in 1998–99 is 331 billion (estimated) and in 1999–2000 is £345.2 billion (estimated).
[5] These figures are for total immigration administration which includes asylum administration costs.
[6] Includes National Asylum Support Service (NASS) administration costs.

Figures for dependants are available only for calendar years. In 1997, there were a total of 8,980 dependants, in 1998 the figure was 12,470. Figures for 1999 and 2000 are not currently available.

In 1997–98 to 1999–2000 asylum seekers were supported by the Department of Social Security and Department of Health (Local authorities). Figures for the numbers being supported change from week to week. Financial year figures for supported asylum seekers are not available.

Immigration Service

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate has been made of the cost of *(a)* Immigration Service personnel (i) in ports, (ii) in Croydon and (iii) abroad and *(b)* immigration appeal adjudicators and tribunals, in the last three years for which figures are available. [118056]

Mrs. Roche: The total cost to the Home Office for Immigration Service personnel was £89 million for 1999–2000, £84.6 million for 1998–99 and £84.5 million for 1997–98. A detailed breakdown is provided in the table:

Immigration Service personnel costs

£ million

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Total	84.5	84.6	89.0
In Ports	81.8	81.0	84.2
In Croydon	2.5	3.3	4.2
Abroad	0.2	0.3	0.6

Notes:
1. Figures for Immigration Service staff abroad are for Airline Liaison Officers. Costs of Immigration Officers/Chief Immigration Officers at Entry Clearance Units are not available.
2. Costs are for salaries and on costs, but exclude accommodation.
3. 1999–2000 figures are estimated final outturn.

The costs of the immigration appeals adjudicators and tribunals are a matter for the Lord Chancellor's Department/Court Service.

Jill Dando Murder Investigation

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 21 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 484W, for what reason the number of police officers working on the Jill Dando murder investigation has been reduced; and if he will make a statement on future numbers. [118306]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The number of police officers deployed on any murder investigation is an operational matter for the relevant Chief Officer of Police, in this case the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

The Commissioner tells me that the size of the team investigating Jill Dando's death is subject to regular management review to ensure the efficient and effective progression of the investigation.

Police Stations

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each constituency in Shropshire the police stations indicating those which served rural communities, which were *(a)* downgraded, *(b)* closed and *(c)* opened (i) between 1979 to 1997 and (ii) since May 1997. [118542]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been advised by West Mercia Constabulary in this operational matter. The answer is given in the table.

Police post	*Rural?*	*Downgraded*	*Closed*	*Opened*
Constituency: Shropshire North[1]				
Hodnet	Yes	—	Sold 1990	—
Llynclys	Yes	—	Sold 1990	—
West Felton	Yes	—	Sold 1991	—
Woore	Yes	—	Sold 1993	—
Whittington	Yes	—	Sold 1993	—
Gobowen	Yes	—	Sold 1994	—
Weston Rhyn	Yes	—	Sold 1996	—

Police post	Rural?	Downgraded	Closed	Opened
Constituency: Shrewsbury and Atcham [1]				
Westbury	Yes	—	Sold 1986	—
Longden	Yes	—	Sold 1987	—
Ford	Yes	—	Sold 1990	—
Shawbury	Yes	—	Sold 1990	—
Atcham	Yes	—	Sold 1990	—
Bowmere Heath	Yes	—	Sold 1992	—
Baschurch	Yes	—	Sold 1992	—
Nesscliffe	Yes	—	Sold 1994	—
Bayston Hill	Yes	—	Sold 1997	—
Constituency: Ludlow [1]				
Church Stretton	Rural (small town station)	Upgraded	Old one closed 1992	Purpose built new station opened 1992
Constituency: Ludlow [2]				
Craven Arms	Rural (small town) section station	Upgraded	Small single storey station closed and sold May 1999	Adjacent house converted to larger station: opened May 1999
Bishops Castle	Rural (small town) station	Size downgraded	1960s station, flats and garaging closed and sold April 1999	Small new purpose built beat station opened April 1999
Chirbury	Yes	—	Sold 1987	—
Broseley	Yes	—	Sold 1996	—
Constituency: Wrekin [1]				
Trench	Yes	—	Sold 1983	—
Hadley	Suburban	—	Sold 1995	—
Tong	Yes	—	Sold 1996	—
Constituency: Telford [1]				
Woodside	Suburban	—	Sold 1995	—
Constituency: Telford [3]				
Madeley	Rural	Old closed—upgraded to a larger station	1999	1999
Oakengates	Town	—	Sold 1999	—

[1] Between 1979 and 1997
[2] From May 1997 onward
[3] Since May 1997

Prison Visits

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the use of telephone booking systems for arranging visits to inmates in prisons in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [118491]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service recognises that telephone booking systems can be an effective tool in managing and allocating the huge number of booked visits which prison establishments have to organise on a daily basis. An increasing number of prisons are developing Information Technology systems for this purpose. The Prison Service has completed a study into the use of telephone booking systems for social and official visits to prisoners, the findings of which have informed the production of a statement of business requirements for the introduction of a computerised visits booking system in all prisons.

The Prison Service is working, in partnership with the private sector, to develop the delivery of improved services through the effective use of Information Technology. One of the aims of this project is the provision of efficient, responsive, customer focused public services, and booked visits are included within the scope of the services to be provided. The Prison Service is in the process of developing the timetable for this work.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many animals were allowed into the United Kingdom during the last 12 months for use in experiments; and what requirements must be met for such animals to be allowed entry into the United Kingdom. [118488]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Home Office does not record centrally the number of animals imported into the United Kingdom for use in scientific procedures. However, Table 2 of the "Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals", published annually in separate volumes for Great Britain and Northern Ireland, records the number of scientific procedures carried out, analysed by Schedule 2 listed species and source of animals. Animals listed in Schedule 2 to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 can only be acquired from designated breeding or supplying establishments for use in procedures authorised under the Act unless the Secretary of State has granted a specific exemption.

Table 2 identifies animals obtained from non-United Kingdom sources broken down between those acquired within the European Union and those acquired from outside the European Union. The statistics for 1999 are

currently being collated and will be published in July. The statistics for 1998 show that the total numbers of animals acquired from non-United Kingdom sources were:

	From European Union sources	*From non-European Union sources*	*Total*
Great Britain	6,800	14,745	21,545
Northern Ireland	28	4	32
Total	6,828	14,749	21,577

The following criteria are applied in deciding applications for such exemptions: no suitable animals must be available from designated breeding or supplying establishments within the United Kingdom; the overseas source must be judged to be of good repute; and travel and import controls must be met. Welfare issues involved in the import of animals from abroad, such as journey times, are also considered as part of the Home Office cost/benefit assessment for project licences.

Prisoners (Religious Services)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason inmates in prisons in England and Wales have to make application to attend religious services; and if he will make a statement. [118489]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service respects the need for all prisoners to be free to practice their religion and makes provision for prisoners to participate in worship.

That participation is voluntary so numbers can vary and are often quite high. In order, therefore, to ensure proper security arrangements are in place and access and movement is satisfactory, prisoners in some prisons are asked to make applications to attend religious services.

Such applications are not intended to compromise the prisoner's access to worship but to ensure the worship is safe and trouble free.

Parole Board (Murderers)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases were heard during the last 12 months by the Parole Board of inmates convicted of murder and seeking parole; and how many such inmates were granted parole. [118380]

Mr. Boateng: The decision whether to release adult murderers on life licence is a matter for the Home Secretary, subject to a recommendation for release from the Parole Board. In the year ended 31 December 1999, the Board considered 590 mandatory life sentence cases, about half of which were tariff expired and, therefore, eligible for release. The Board recommended release in 75 of these cases. Sixty-three of these recommendations were accepted, three were rejected, and nine are still under consideration.

Those sentenced to detention during Her Majesty's pleasure (having been convicted of a murder committed when under the age of 18) are released on the direction of the Parole Board once their tariffs have expired. The Board considered 41 such cases in 1999 and directed release in 15 of them.

Illegal Sales

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* convictions there were in courts in the United Kingdom for dealing in the illegal re-sale of tobacco, spirits and beer imported from other European countries during 1999. [118487]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office Court Proceedings Database does not hold information about the characteristics of individual cases apart from those that are evident from the description of the offence with which the defendant has been charged.

Defendants prosecuted for the illegal re-sale of items would be prosecuted under section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979. However, the database does not separately identify such cases from other offences under the Act.

Cannabis

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what guidance is given to the Crown Prosecution Service on action to be taken against persons with multiple sclerosis who use cannabis as a beneficial homeopathic treatment; and what plans he has to review the guidance; [118531]

(2) what guidance is given to the police on action to be taken against persons with multiple sclerosis who use cannabis as a beneficial homeopathic treatment; and what plans he has to review the guidance. [118529]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Possession of cannabis is a criminal offence and it is for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to decide whether to prosecute in a particular case, taking account of the individual merits. If there is sufficient evidence to prosecute, then both the police and the Crown Prosecution Service will weigh public interest considerations.

The police have a range of guidance, the most recent was issued by the Association of Chief Police Officers in February last year; there are no plans to review this guidance. The Crown Prosecution Service assess all cases in accordance with the Code for Crown Prosecutors; this Code is currently under review.

Prisoners (Solitary Confinement)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners have been kept in solitary confinement by reason of their violent nature and representing a threat to others for each year since 1995. [118534]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested cannot be obtained from the centrally available data; a response could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Freedom of Information

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons his Department did not publish the Draft Code of Practice, pursuant to Clause 44 of the Freedom of Information Bill, before the afternoon of 4 April. [118522]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The working draft of the Code of Practice was published at the earliest opportunity following necessary consultations with colleagues.

Copies of the draft Code were placed in the Library on 4 April and sent on the same day to members of the Standing Committee B which had scrutinised the Freedom of Information Bill in Committee.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions Ministers have withheld information from public disclosure under the exemption clauses of the Code of Practice on Disclosure of Official Information since May 1997. [118496]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government publish annual monitoring reports on the operation of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The reports contain statistics on the number of Code requests received by each Department in that calendar year and include details as to the number of requests which have been refused. However, the reports do not identify which of these cases were referred to Ministers or where decisions were taken by officials.

The 1997 report shows that, for the calendar year, 1,894 requests were refused—of which 1,735 relate to premature applications to the Health and Safety Executive for information relating to civil proceedings. Excluding these cases, the number of refusals of requests over the year was 159.

The 1998 report shows that in that year, 1,745 requests were refused—of which 1,534 related to premature applications to the Health and Safety Executive for information relating to civil proceedings. Excluding these cases, the number of refusals of requests over the year was 211.

The 1999 Monitoring report, which will contain the relevant statistics for last year, is being compiled and I will publish it in due course.

Probation Service

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will establish a review of the *(a)* hours worked and *(b)* pay rates of employees of the Probation Service, to include a comparison over the past decade of relativities with (i) teachers, (ii) police officers and (iii) social workers. [118334]

Mr. Boateng: We are looking carefully at workforce planning for the new Probation Service. As part of this, we are taking part in reviews of structures for pay and grading and of employee care and work priorities. I do not believe a further review of hours and pay would be appropriate at present.

Schengen Information System

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if participation in the Schengen information system by the United Kingdom will require the United Kingdom to opt into an agreement based on *(a)* Title IV of the Treaty of the European Community or *(b)* other European treaties. [117406]

Mrs. Roche: Participation by the United Kingdom in the Schengen Information System (SIS) will require the exercise of the United Kingdom's opt-in under Article 4 of the Protocol integrating the Schengen acquis into the framework of the European Union, annexed to the Treaty of Amsterdam. The Government have submitted a request under this provision for participation in aspects of the Schengen acquis, including the SIS, and we are currently awaiting its approval. The SIS has been allocated to a legal base in the Treaty on European Union.

Police Recruitment

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 596W, and his answer to the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) of 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1–3W, and to the hon. Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) of 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 172W, what estimate he has made of the change in police numbers in England and Wales between April 2002 and March 2003 following his announcement that the extra recruits under the Crime Fighting Fund will be recruited over two years rather than three; what number of police officers he plans to recruit in England and Wales in the three years to March 2003; and what are his revised estimates of the total number of police officers in England and Wales over each of the next three years. [118805]

Mr. Straw: The additional funding announced in the Budget will allow us to provide for completing the recruitment of the 5,000 officers allocated under the Crime Fighting Fund by March 2002. It will allow for the recruitment of at least 2,000 in 2000–01 and 3,000 (or the remainder) in 2001–02. This means that the theoretical projections of police numbers, based on forces' estimates for recruitment and wastage, for the next two years are as follows:

March 2001—125,500

March 2002—127,000.

The March 2002 projection approximates to the 1997 figure of 127,158.

On the basis of projections made earlier this year alone, the theoretical figure for March 2003 would be 125,900, as cited in the reply given by the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 177–79W. Chief Officers projections were made on the basis of the Compensation Spending Review settlement which extends to 2001–02, but in the absence of any information about funding levels for the police service in 2002–03. Funding levels from 2002–03 onwards will be known only when the outcome of the 2000 Spending Review is announced in the summer, when more realistic projections can be made.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117810]

Mr. Straw: The number of lawyers employed in the Home Office Legal Adviser's Branch on 31 March 1995 was 18. On 31 March 2000, the Branch had 31 lawyers in post (equating, when part-time staff are taken into account, to 30.5 posts) and two vacancies (which have now been filled by lawyers on loan from other Government Departments). Four of the lawyers in post on 31 March 2000 were also on loan from other Government Departments. The Branch provides legal services to the Northern Ireland Office as well as the Home Office.

In addition to its traditional responsibilities, the Home Office has, since May 1997, taken responsibility for an important part of the Government's constitutional programme, including the Human Rights Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Bill and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. The Branch also has responsibility for Northern Ireland constitutional legislation. Home Office lawyers have 12 Bills (including Bills for the Northern Ireland Office) in the Government's programme for the current parliamentary session.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 13 April 2000

NORTHERN IRELAND

Violence Victims

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the organisations claiming to support victims of violence which *(a)* are currently receiving and *(b)* have received public funds; and how much each has received. [117123]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 12 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 189–96W.

Winter Fuel Allowance

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate he has made of the additional number of pensioners in Northern Ireland entitled to the winter fuel allowance following the European Court of Justice judgment of 15 December 1999. [118120]

Mr. George Howarth: It is estimated that there will be 39,000 additional people in Northern Ireland entitled to Winter Fuel Payments as a result of the European Court of Justice judgment. I should point out that these people will not all be pensioners, as men aged between 60–64 are not receiving retirement pension.

Wheelchairs

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the average time taken *(a)* to process an application for a wheelchair and *(b)* for an applicant to receive a wheelchair. [118581]

Mr. George Howarth: The average time taken to process an application for a wheelchair depends on the type of equipment required. For level 1 wheelchairs, applications are processed within one working day of receipt at the Regional Wheelchair Centre and chairs are delivered to clients within five working days. For level 2 modified equipment, an application takes 10 working days to process and the equipment is delivered within 20 working days. For level 3 specialised equipment, processing of an order takes 10 working days and delivery of the equipment can take in the region of 3–6 months.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many wheelchairs have been allocated to applicants in each of the last three years in Northern Ireland. [118579]

Mr. George Howarth: The information is as follows:

1 January-31 December 1997: 2,905

1 January-31 December 1998: 3,586

1 January-31 December 1998: 2,631

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons in Northern Ireland have *(a)* applied for and *(b)* are awaiting the allocation of a wheelchair. [118580]

Mr. George Howarth: There are 257 applicants awaiting the allocation of a wheelchair. The vast majority of these are existing wheelchair users who, due to changing circumstances, need more specialised equipment, which has been ordered and is awaiting delivery.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women have benefited from the New Deal in the North-East. [117940]

Ms Jowell: Up to the end of January 2000, 31,838 young people (23,926 men and 7,912 women) and 17,753 long-term unemployed adults (15,620 men and 2,133 women) have benefited from the New Deals in the North-East. It is a measure of the success of the Government's Welfare to Work policies that 16,652 people in the North-East have found work through the New Deals. The remainder are benefiting from the help that the Personal Adviser can offer. This includes help with barriers to employment, access to specialist help and training, education and work experience opportunities. New Deals for the long-term unemployed are only part of the package of Welfare to Work measures introduced by this Government. Many other people in the North-East will benefit from the New Deals for Lone Parents, 50 plus, partners of the unemployed and the disabled.

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women have benefited from the New Deal in Houghton and Washington East. [117977]

Ms Jowell: Up to the end of January 2000, 1,032 young people (787 men and 245 women) and 478 long-term unemployed adults (411 men and 67 women) have benefited from the New Deals in the Houghton and Washington East constituency. It is a measure of the success of the Government's Welfare to Work policies that 522 people in Houghton and Washington East have found work through these New Deals. The remainder are benefiting from the help that the Personal Adviser can offer. This includes help with barriers to employment, access to specialist help and training, education and work experience opportunities. New Deals for the long-term unemployed are only part of the package of Welfare to Work measures introduced by this Government. Many other people in Houghton and Washington East will benefit from the New Deals for Lone Parents, 50 plus, partners of the unemployed and the disabled.

Standard Spending Assessments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 49–51W, if he will provide the corresponding estimates of education standard spending assessments per pupil for *(a)* England and *(b)* Thamesdown. [118916]

Ms Estelle Morris: The figures requested are shown in the table. Information for Thamesdown was listed under Swindon in the answer given to the hon. Member on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 49–51W.

	Thamesdown (Swindon)	*England*
SSA		
Per Primary Pupil	2,290	2,474
Per Secondary Pupil	2,957	3,175
Total Special and Specific Grant per Pupil	151	173

CABINET OFFICE

Organisation of Public Sector Ombudsmen

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she will publish the report of the review of the Organisation of Public Sector Ombudsmen in England. [119218]

Mr. Stringer: I am pleased to announce that the report of the review of the organisation of public sector ombudsmen in England is published today. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House and are also available from the Vote Office.

The start of the review was announced by the then Minister for the Cabinet Office on 30 March 1999 and forms part of the Modernising Government agenda. The review, which was carried out by a team in the Cabinet Office, was wide-ranging: it covered the Parliamentary Ombudsman, the Health Service Ombudsman for England and the Local Government Ombudsmen for England, and looked at the potential interaction between those ombudsmen and other independent complaints authorities such as the independent Housing Ombudsman and the Data Protection Commissioner. The review team consulted widely with those who have an interest in the ombudsmen system, including all Members, the ombudsmen themselves, central and local Government, representative bodies (such as the Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) and external interest groups.

The main recommendations in the report are that the Parliamentary Ombudsman, the Health Service Ombudsman in England and the Local Government Ombudsmen in England should be merged into a collegiate structure (a new Commission); and that the present requirement for complainants to put their complaints via a Member to the Parliamentary Ombudsman (the "MP filter") should be removed; and that their procedures be simplified and made more flexible.

The Government welcome the review's focus on providing a more customer-oriented Ombudsman service. It recognises that the recommendations raise a number of significant issues about the status and constitution of the Ombudsmen. Accordingly, we shall now be consulting widely before reaching our final conclusions on implementing the review's recommendations.

GMOs

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she is taking to increase international co-operation on issues relating to genetically modified organisms. [117726]

Mr. Stringer: International co-operation is a crucial part of this Government's policy in biotechnology, which gives priority to the protection of human health and the environment. The UK is active in a number of international bodies, including the World Health Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the Codex Alimentarius group. It has pressed at European level on issues such as GM food labelling and releases of GMOs to the environment; and in January negotiated the United Nations Programme Biosafety Protocol. Most recently, it successfully hosted an OECD conference on GM food safety in Edinburgh. We will be discussing the results of that conference, including the recommendation for an international scientific advisory panel on GM food and environmental safety, with G8 partners and developing countries in advance of the next G8 summit.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Workplace Parking

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many workplace car parking spaces are available at the buildings used and controlled by his Department. [116757]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 30 March 2000]:* The number of workplace car parking spaces available at buildings used and controlled by my Department is contained in the DETR Greening Operations Annual Report 1998–99, dated December 1999. We have prepared travel plans for all our key buildings in line with the commitment set out in the Transport White Paper and are reviewing the scope for reducing our car parking requirements in that context.

HSE (Field Operations Division)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the *(a)* operational managers and *(b)* principal inspectors of health and safety in the Field Operations Division of the Health and Safety Executive possess qualifications in management. [118407]

Mr. Meacher: The number of operational managers in HSE's Field Operations Directorate with externally recognised management qualifications is three.

The number of principal inspectors in HSE's Field Operations Directorate with externally recognised management qualifications is 11.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the report on management among the principal inspectors of health and safety in field offices of the HSE; and what action is planned as a result of the report. [118388]

Mr. Meacher: It is assumed that the report referred to is an internal study on the workload of operational managers in the Field Operations Directorate. The study was commissioned by the Director of Field Operations and reported to him in June 1998. A copy of the report has been placed in the Library. Action on the specific recommendations in the report has been taken forward by the Directorate in consultation with the managers concerned, and is nearing completion.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ensure that all HSE field offices of the Field Operations Division have staffed reception areas for members of the public in easily-accessible ground floor locations. [118387]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 requires the Health and Safety Commission to provide an "information and advisory service" to help the public. While the Health and Safety Executive ensure that members of the public have access to the information and advice they require, it cannot be guaranteed that staffed reception areas in ground floor locations will be available. In light of the relatively small number of personal callers to offices, a judgment has to be made as to whether a permanently staffed reception area is the most efficient use of resources.

Hospital Infections

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance the Health and Safety Executive has issued, or plans to issue, on hospital-acquired infection relating to employees and patients of the NHS. [118406]

Mr. Meacher: HSE has not issued any guidance on hospital-acquired infections to patients, and has no plans to do so. The primary responsibility for issuing such guidance rests with the Department of Health (DoH) although HSE is consulted where appropriate.

HSE has, however, produced guidance which is relevant to certain aspects of the control of infection in health services, notably the Health Services Advisory Committee's guidance "The safe disposal of clinical waste" and "The safe working and prevention of infection in clinical laboratories, mortuaries and post mortem rooms".

HSE's guidance and the code of practice under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1999 cover general precautions against infection risks, although they do not specifically address hospital-acquired infection.

HSE is also planning to produce a leaflet on the risks from blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis and HIV, which will be applicable to a number of occupational groups including the healthcare sector.

HSE (Travelling Expenses)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the travelling expenses were of the NW regional director of the Health and Safety Executive in the last two and the current financial years. [118384]

Mr. Meacher: The travelling expenses for the NW regional director of the Health and Safety Executive are as follows:

1997–98—£2,146.18

1998–99—£1,064.97

1999–20000—£4,489.57

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the increase in travelling claims as a result of the closure of the Health and Safety Executive Office at the Triad, Bootle. [118383]

Mr. Meacher: The estimated increase in travelling claims as a result of the closure of the Health and Safety Executive Office at the Triad, Bootle is £36,518 per annum in the first three years following the closure of the office, and £26,136 in the fourth year, with further reductions thereafter as Inspectors retire or move to other locations.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the total travelling expenses of inspectors of health and safety in field offices of the Field Operations Division were in financial year 1999–2000. [118409]

Mr. Meacher: In financial year 1999–2000, the total travelling expenses of the inspectors in field offices of the Field Operations Directorate were £2,899,965.

HSE (Manchester Office)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what will be the allocation of space per employee at the proposed new location for the Manchester office of the Health and Safety Executive; what is the current allocation; and if the new premises comply fully with the Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act 1963 as regards *(a)* toilet provision and *(b)* space standards. [118386]

Mr. Meacher: The allocation of space at the proposed new location for the Manchester office will be 18.5 sq m per employee. The current allocation at the existing Manchester office is 22.5 sq m. The new (proposed) premises will comply fully with the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 as regards *(a)* toilet premises and *(b)* space standards. The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 replaced the relevant sections of the Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act 1963.

HSE (Principal Inspectors)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the average age is of principal inspectors of health and safety in HSE field offices. [118405]

Mr. Meacher: The average age of principle inspectors of health and safety in HSE field offices is 49 years calculated as at today's date.

HSE (Meetings)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the NW

regional director of the Health and Safety Executive last met *(a)* the NW TUC and *(b)* the NW Regional Development Association. [118385]

Mr. Meacher: The NW regional director of the Health and Safety Executive last met the NW TUC on 3 February 1999 and the NW Health Partnership, under the auspices of the NW Regional Development Agency, on 9 February 2000.

Index of Local Deprivation

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which independent academic experts have been consulted over his proposals for changes to the index of local deprivation. [118554]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The index review team benefited from the advice of an advisory panel of 40 academic and other experts. The panel included academics from number of universities including Bath, Bristol, Birmingham, Cambridge, Lincolnshire and Humberside, the London School of Economics, Warwick and York and members of other organisations including the Policy Studies Institute, the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency and members of the Central and Local Government Information Partnership sub-group on deprivation statistics.

Housing

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his oral statement of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 811, on housing, how much of the money he announced has been allocated to Wales; how much of this is additional money; and if he will make a statement. [118486]

Mr. Mullin: The money referred to by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions was for investment in housing in England. The allocation of resources for housing in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Air Rage

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other EU member states concerning the incidence of air rage in their respective air carriers; and if he will make a statement. [118532]

Mr. Mullin: Specific discussions at an EU level have not taken place but my officials and those from the CAA actively participate in a number of international fora where air rage issues are discussed and where other EU member states are represented. These include meetings of the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the European Civil Aviation Conference, the International Air Transport Association and the Flight Safety Foundation. I understand in the EU only the UK has published comprehensive data on the incidence of air rage, therefore it is not possible to make comparisons with other member states' carriers.

Housing Act 1996

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if it is Government policy that the Housing Act 1996 should be amended so that local authorities must provide a written explanation of the reasons for *(a)* excluding and *(b)* suspending an individual from the Housing Register; [118309]

(2) the Housing Act 1996 should be amended to prevent the exclusion of people in housing need, except in exceptional circumstances. [118308]

Mr. Mullin: The Housing Act 1996 gives local authorities considerable discretion to decide what classes of person qualify, or not, to appear on the housing register. In making any decision to reject a person's application to be put on its housing register, the authority must notify the applicant in writing.

On 4 April 2000, the Government published their plans for a comprehensive review of housing policy in England in the Housing Green Paper "Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All". This sets out the Government's proposals for providing choice in social housing. The Government do not believe that anyone should be permanently excluded from social housing and therefore propose to remove the power local authorities have to impose 'blanket' exclusions. Instead the Government propose to allow authorities temporarily to reduce the priority or suspend the applications of households on an individual basis where this is justified. In applying any such sanction, authorities would be required to explain the reason in writing and to give applicants a clear indication of any action necessary to have the restriction removed. They would have a right of appeal in cases of dispute.

Any decisions to suspend an application would need to consider carefully the circumstances of the household in order to safeguard vulnerable people. Suspensions would be used in exceptional circumstances where other means of managing a problem had been exhausted.

Gas Safety

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has held with representatives of the Health and Safety Executive regarding excess gas flow valves. [118593]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), on behalf of the Health and Safety Commission (HSC), is undertaking a fundamental review of the current health and safety regime for the installation and use of gas to determine whether, or how far, changes are needed to the existing system of control.

The use of excess gas flow valves is one of the many issues being considered in the review. HSE officials have twice met a manufacturer of excess gas flow valves; and HSE has received a written submission from them in response to the fundamental review's discussion document.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received about gas safety in domestic dwellings. [118596]

Mr. Meacher: A fundamental review of the current health and safety regime for the installation and use of gas is currently being conducted by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on behalf of the Health and Safety Commission (HSC). Over 650 replies have been received so far in response to the discussion document "Gas safety review: Options for change" published in November 1999 and recent related consultative exercises in Glasgow and Lambeth.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many gas explosions have occurred in each of the past five years in domestic properties. [118594]

Mr. Meacher: In the period 1995–99 (last available figure to date) the number of gas-related explosions/fires in domestic premises reported to the HSE under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations was as follows:

Year	*Number*
1994–95	35
1995–96	42
1996–97	40
1997–98	45
1998–99	[1]37

[1] Subject to validation

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to discuss with housing bodies installation of excess gas flow valves in *(a)* high rise flats and *(b)* other domestic properties at risk from gas explosions. [118595]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), on behalf of the Health and Safety Commission (HSC), is undertaking a fundamental review of the current health and safety regime for the installation and use of gas to determine whether, or how far, changes are needed to the existing system of control. The use of excess gas flow valves in all domestic properties, including high rise flats, is being considered as part of the review.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has recently *(a)* made to and *(b)* received from the Health and Safety Executive about the health and safety implications of telecommunications masts sited in residential areas. [118289]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My officials regularly discuss the health and safety aspects of telecommunications development with officials from the Health and Safety Executive. They have, in particular, held discussions about the joint DETR/DH circular on land use planning and electro-magnetic fields. The guidance will be finalised as soon as practicable after the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones has reported.

Correspondence

Mr. Arbuthnot: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire of 29 November 1999, regarding his constituents, Mr. and Mrs. Hewett. [118845]

Mr. Meacher: I replied to the right hon. Member's letter on 12 April.

Westminister Underground Station

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will call for a report from the Health and Safety Executive on the health implications of the continuing accumulation of garbage, in the walkway between Westminster underground station and the House; and if he will call for reports from London Underground on *(a)* the continued failure (i) to operate lifts at Westminster Station and (ii) to remove netting, fencing and tapes from the walkway from that station to the House on the recessed platform adjoining that walkway and *(b)* on signal failures on the westbound Jubilee Line on the morning of Monday 10 April. [118910]

Mr. Hill: These are operational matters for London Underground (LU). HM Railways Inspectorate, part of the HSE organisation, is in discussion with LU on outstanding issues at Westminster and elsewhere on the extended Jubilee line.

LUL has cleared litter from the subway in question and will be liaising with Westminster Council (who own the new subway) to ensure that a regime is developed for routine maintenance and cleaning.

Three of the five lifts at Westminster are already operating. The remaining two are expected to enter service by the end of next month.

Fencing, tape etc. are in place where there is still work to be done (such as installing permanent lighting) in order to separate the works from the general public. In the interests of public presentation, white painted hoardings are shortly to replace some fencing, and will cover a few currently exposed ledges.

On the morning of 10 April, trains ran on average every 3–5 minutes westbound through Westminster. There was an 8 minute gap at 08.38 due to the activation of a passenger emergency alarm at Waterloo. There was a 7 minute gap at 09.24 due to a passenger being taken ill on a train at Canary Wharf. Finally, there was a 13 minute gap at 09.48 due to signal computer problems.

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure greater protection for the public from carbon monoxide poisoning. [118872]

Mr. Meacher: The Government fully support the published commitment of the Health and Safety Commission to reducing gas-related carbon monoxide poisoning fatalities by at least 10 per cent. over a 10 year average. To further this aim, the Commission published a discussion document on 4 November 1999, entitled "Gas safety review: options for change" to invite views on a wide range of issues which impact on domestic gas safety. This reflects preliminary representations made to the Health and Safety Executive by key consumer and industry stakeholders, analysis of accident data, and work commissioned under the auspices of the Government's People's Panel initiative on the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of Panel members in relation to gas safety.

The discussion document and recent related public consultation exercises in Glasgow and Lambeth have yielded in excess of 650 replies, which are now being evaluated. The Government expect to receive a report of the conclusions of the Commission in the summer on what further regulatory or other action may be justified to enable the agreed target to be met or exceeded in the most equitable and cost-effective way.

GM Crop Trials

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of genetically modified crop trials in the United Kingdom. [117740]

Mr. Meacher: Following my announcement about the Farm Scale Evaluations on 17 March, my Department has been notified of 42 proposed field sites. This information is available on our website, which is regularly updated.

During the spring, GM maize, beet and spring oil seed rape will be planted in part of each field involved in the programme, and the rest of the field will be planted with the equivalent non-GM crop. Independent researchers will then study what effects, if any, growing and managing the GM crops has on wildlife.

Demonstrating the Government's commitment to openness and transparency on GM issues, my Department has arranged a series of public meetings across England, about the research programme. These meetings provide local people living near to the trial sites an opportunity to hear a series of presentations about the Evaluations and to put questions to a panel consisting of an official from my Department, one of the scientists from the independent researchers, a representative from an environmental group and a representative from the biotechnology industry.

Flooding (Planning Guidance)

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made with the revision of planning guidance on flooding. [119334]

Mr. Raynsford: A consultation paper on a new Planning Policy Guidance Note 25 "Development and flood risk" is published today and has been placed on the Department's website.

The Government recognise the importance of flooding and the effects it can have on people's lives. While there is no quick and easy solution, in the longer term a more precautionary and risk-based approach will ensure that new development is not exposed to risk unnecessarily or itself add to flood risk in other areas. Taken together with MAFF and Environment Agency initiatives on flood warning and flood defence, this new guidance will assist in reducing the potential impact of flooding.

The draft guidance published today takes account of the developing knowledge of the likely impacts of climate change, but recognises the inherent uncertainties. Planning decisions should apply the precautionary principle to avoid inappropriate development in flood-risk areas. Where other material considerations outweigh flood risk in favour of proceeding with development, the draft guidance emphasises the need to design and defend such development to an adequate level to ensure the safety of people and minimise property damage. It also emphasises the need for developers to contribute towards the cost of flood defences that may be required as a result of implementing their project.

The draft guidance advises that it is necessary to look at development and flood management on a wider scale and to ensure that run-off from new development is controlled as near the source as possible through the use of sustainable drainage systems. This mitigates the problems caused when additional run-off from extensions to built-up areas increases flood risk downstream.

Thaumasite

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the review of the conclusions of the report of the Expert Group on Thaumasite. [119400]

Mr. Raynsford: I am today publishing, on my Department's website, the review undertaken by Professor Leslie Clark of the conclusions of the report of the Expert Group on Thaumasite which he chaired and which reported in January 1999. When I announced the publication of the report last year I said that I had asked Professor Clark to review its conclusions in a year's time in the light of the findings of further research and monitoring which was then being commissioned.

The review found that the recommendations of the Thaumasite Expert Group's report were robust and continue to minimise the risk of the thaumasite form of sulphate attack in new construction. The report has been generally well received by the construction industry and is viewed as sound and well balanced.

There have been 20 new cases of the thaumasite form of sulphate attack identified in the last year. All of these have taken place in conditions that were anticipated in the report. None have posed any threat to public safety.

The new data available do not permit relaxation at present of the report's recommendations with one exception. There is a majority view within the Expert Group that the report's very conservative procedure for assessing the sulphate class of sulphide bearing ground can now, with safety, be relaxed somewhat in respect of pyritic clays. The review has also suggested the need for clarification of some aspects of the guidance given in the relevant BRE Digests and British Standards.

Local Government Bill

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many replies were received in response to consultation on draft guidance and regulations under Part II of the Local Government Bill [*Lords*]. [119403]

Ms Armstrong: 176 written responses have been received to consultation to date. None of these have asked to remain confidential. A list has today been placed in the Library of the House and full copies of these have been made available in my Department's library for public scrutiny.

We will consider carefully all these responses before publishing a revised draft for further consultation after Easter.

Water Industry (Competition)

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made with the review of competition in the water industry. [119431]

Mr. Meacher: The Government are today publishing, jointly with the National Assembly for Wales, a consultation paper entitled "Competition in the Water Industry in England and Wales". Copies of this paper have been placed in the Libraries of the House and it is available on the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' website.

The Government believe that the properly managed development of effective competition in the water industry in England and Wales is desirable. It should benefit consumers by promoting greater efficiency, lower prices, innovation and better services—as it has in other utilities. This consultation paper seeks views on how increased competition can be arranged in ways that safeguard, in particular, public health, the environment and wider social objectives. We are keen to receive a wide range of responses to inform policy decisions. We expect that some of these will be taken forward in a future water Bill.

Polychlorinated Biphenyls

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when regulations providing for the phasing out and disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls will be laid before Parliament. [119432]

Mr. Meacher: The Environmental Protection (Disposal of Polychlorinated Biphenyls and other Dangerous Substances) (England and Wales) Regulations 2000 were laid before Parliament today.

They require holders of PCB contaminated equipment to register with the Environment Agency and, subject to certain specific exemptions, for PCBs and associated equipment to be disposed of by the end of December this year. The agency will also have responsibilities in relation to monitoring and enforcement.

The Regulations will have the effect of curtailing release of PCBs, and so lowering their concentrations in the environment, including in relation to sea mammals, in which PCBs have been found in significant quantities.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Green Park

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on *(a)* the landscaping being undertaken in Green Park and *(b)* when the fountains will be turned on. [118291]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of this question has been delegated to the Royal Parks Agency and I have asked for a reply to be given.

Letter from Viviane Robertson to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 13 April 2000:

A new Chief Executive has not yet been appointed and, because it is an operational matter which is the responsibility of the Agency, I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the nature of the landscaping work in Green Park, and when the fountains are to be turned on.

We are re-seeding the area behind the Canada Gate in Green Park following remedial work to problems associated with flooding in the past. The seeding is due to be completed by the end of the month and the grass should begin to appear during May. The area will remain fenced because it is usually heavily used and the new grass needs to be protected until it is well established.

The Canadian memorial water feature is usually operational. When it fails, as it occasionally does, it is repaired and brought back into service as soon as possible. The Constance Fund fountain is on the route of the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Walkway and is being restored in time for the official opening of the walkway in June this year.

Lottery Sports Fund

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much Lottery money has been allocated to the Lottery Sports Fund for each of the last four years; and how much is planned to be allocated in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [118783]

Kate Hoey: The total amount of Lottery proceeds (including interest) allocated to sport for 1996–97, 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 was:

£ million

Year	*Amount of Lottery proceeds*
1996–97	314
1997–98	368
1998–99	307
1999–2000	273

The total Lottery proceeds (including a notional estimate for interest) to be allocated to Sport for 2000–01 and 2001–02 have been estimated using the Lottery income scenarios which the Department sent to distributing bodies in October 1999:

£ million

Year	*Forecast income*
2000–01	245 to 292
2001–02	226 to 298

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many awards have been made to date by the Lottery Sports Fund; how many have been made for tennis; and what is the total amount spent on tennis projects from the Lottery funds to date. [118784]

Kate Hoey: The five distributing bodies of the Lottery Sports Fund have made over 6,300 awards to sport since the inception of the National Lottery in November 1994. Of these, nearly 600 awards have been made to tennis projects with a total value of over £29 million.

Lottery Arts Fund

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what is the allocation per head from the Lottery Arts Fund since its establishment for Waverley Borough Council; and which local authority has had the *(a)* largest and *(b)* lowest allocation per head; [118787]

(2) how much money has been allocated to the Lottery Arts Fund since its establishment; and how much was spent from the fund in Surrey in each of the last three years; [118785]

(3) how many awards have been made from Lottery funds to arts centres for capital projects. [118786]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I have asked the Arts Council of England, as the main distributing body of lottery money for the arts, to provide this information. When it is available, I will write to the right hon. Member and place a copy in the Library of the House.

Picketts Lock

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the British Olympic Association about the suitability of the proposed athletics facility at Picketts Lock to host the 2012 or 2016 Olympics. [118114]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I met representatives of UK Athletics, UK Sport, Sport England, the British Olympic Association and London International Sport on 24 March to discuss the bid for the 2005 World Athletics Championships. At that meeting, the British Olympic Association indicated that they were content with Picketts Lock as having the potential for facilities to stage an Olympic Games.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he last visited Picketts Lock, Enfield. [118111]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* Neither my right hon. Friend nor I have visited Picketts Lock recently.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what financial *(a)* help and *(b)* guarantees his Department has offered to UK Athletics for the development of Picketts Lock; [118215]

(2) what discussions he has had with the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority about the long-term ownership and use of the proposed athletics stadium at Picketts Lock; [118110]

(3) what discussions he has held with *(a)* Railtrack and *(b)* ministerial colleagues in the DETR about improving rail links to Picketts Lock, Enfield; [118112]

(4) what discussions he has held with Ministerial colleagues in the DETR about improving road links to Picketts Lock, Enfield; [118109]

(5) what external advice he has received on the likely timetable of works for the development of a major athletics facility at Picketts Lock, in relation to *(a)* design, *(b)* planning, *(c)* demolition of existing facilities and *(d)* construction; [118113]

(6) what discussions he has had with *(a)* the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and *(b)* Enfield Council about the proposed athletics facility at Picketts Lock; and what financial support they have offered for the project. [118117]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* UK Athletics is to be congratulated on securing both the 2003 World Indoor Championships in Birmingham and 2005 World Athletics Championships in London at Picketts Lock. UK Athletics is now continuing the process of drawing up detailed proposals for developing the site, including proposals for road and rail links. That process will involve discussions with the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, the London Borough of Enfield, Sport England, UK Sport, the Government Office for London and my Department, among others.

Prior to making the bid presentation to the IAAF in Paris, UK Athletics and Sport England undertook extensive discussions with a range of parties across London to determine the optimum site for staging the 2005 championships in London. During that process representatives from UK Athletics and Sport England and an official from my Department met representatives of the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and the London Borough of Enfield on 21 March to discuss the feasibility of the Picketts Lock site for staging the championships. At that meeting, the Park Authority indicated that funds were already earmarked in its business plan for developing the Picketts Lock site and both capital and revenue contributions might be forthcoming to a world-class athletics facility on that site.

National Lottery

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to the oral statement by the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting, of 11 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 11WH, if he will set out the Government's position on not-for-profit bidders for the next licence to run the National Lottery. [119305]

Mr. Chris Smith: We have maintained the policy of seeking (and welcoming) any bids from efficient not-for-profit operators; but the selection of the next operator of the National Lottery is a matter for the National Lottery Commission, not the Government. Subject to ensuring that players are protected and the Lottery is run with all due propriety, the Commission will award the next licence to the bidder likely to raise the most for the good causes. Any comments made by my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting during the course of the debate on 11 April should not be interpreted as contradicting this position in any way.

Spoliation Advisory Panel

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will announce the membership and terms of reference of the Spoliation Advisory Panel. [119219]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Following consultation on our proposals on both the membership and the terms of reference, I am now able to do so. In establishing the Spoliation Advisory Panel the Government's aim, by

providing an alternative to litigation, is to facilitate a just resolution of claims made for cultural objects that may have been looted in the Nazi era between 1933 and 1945.

The membership of the Panel will be:

Chair: The right hon. Sir David Hirst

Mr. Donell Deeny QC

Professor Richard Evans

Sir Terry Heiser

Professor Peter Jones

Mr. Martin Levy

Mr. Peter Oppenheimer

Professor Norman Palmer

Ms Anna Southall

Dr. Liba Taub

Baroness Warnock.

The constitution and Terms of Reference proposed for the Panel are as set out. These have been revised as a result of consultation and the Government believe they offer a fair way forward. The Panel will be able to advise not only claimants and those who hold the items in question in their collections, but also the Government. The Government intend that the Panel should begin work as soon as possible.

Spoliation Advisory Panel

Constitution and Terms of Reference

Members of the Panel

1. The members of the Spoliation Advisory Panel (the Panel) will be appointed by the Secretary of State on such terms and conditions as he thinks fit. The Secretary of State shall appoint one member as Chairman of the Panel.

Resources for the Panel

2. The Secretary of State will make available such resources as he considers necessary to enable the Panel to carry out its functions, including administrative support provided by a Secretariat (the Secretariat).

Functions of the Panel

3. The task of the Panel is to consider claims from anyone (or from any one or more of their heirs), who lost possession of a cultural object (the object) during the Nazi era (1933–45), where such object is now in the possession of a UK national collection or in the possession of another UK museum or gallery established for the public benefit (the institution). The Panel shall advise the claimant and the institution on what would be appropriate action to take in response to such a claim. The Panel shall also be available to advise about any claim for an item in a private collection at the joint request of the claimant and the owner.

4. In any case where the Panel considers it appropriate, it may also advise the Secretary of State

(a) on what action should be taken in relation to general issues raised by the claim, and/or

(b) where it considers that the circumstances of the particular claim warrant it, on what action should be taken in relation to that claim.

5.(a) In exercising its functions, while the Panel will consider legal issues relating to title to the object (see paragraph 7(d) and (f)), it will not be the function of the Panel to determine legal rights, for example as to title;

(b) The Panel's proceedings are an alternative to litigation, not a process of litigation. The Panel will therefore take into account non-legal obligations, such as the moral strength of the claimant's case (paragraph 7(e)) and whether any moral obligation rests on the institution (paragraph 7(g));

(c) Any recommendation made by the Panel is not intended to be legally binding on the claimant, the institution or the Secretary of State;

(d) If the claimant accepts the recommendation of the Panel and that recommendation is implemented, the claimant is expected to accept the implementation in full and final settlement of his claim.

Performance of the Panel's functions

6. In performing the functions set out in paragraphs 3 and 4, the Panel's paramount purpose shall be to achieve a solution which is fair and just both to the claimant and to the institution.

7. For this purpose the Panel shall:

(a) make such factual and legal inquiries, (including the seeking of advice about legal matters, about cultural objects and about valuation of such objects) as the Panel consider appropriate to assess each claim as comprehensively as possible;

(b) assess all information and material submitted by or on behalf of the claimant and the institution or any other person, or otherwise provided or known to the Panel;

(c) examine and determine the circumstances in which the claimant was deprived of the object, whether by theft, forced sale, sale at an undervalue, or otherwise;

(d) evaluate, on the balance of probability, the validity of the claimant's original title to the object, recognising the difficulties of proving such title after the destruction of the Second World War and the Holocaust and the duration of the period which has elapsed since the claimant lost possession of the object;

(e) give due weight to the moral strength of the claimant's case;

(f) evaluate, on the balance of probability, the validity of the institution's title to the object;

(g) consider whether any moral obligation rests on the institution taking into account in particular the circumstances of its acquisition of the object, and its knowledge at that juncture of the object's provenance;

(h) take account of any relevant statutory provisions, including stipulations as to the institution's objectives, and any restrictions on its power of disposal;

(i) take account of the terms of any trust instrument regulating the powers and duties of the trustees of the institution, and give appropriate weight to their fiduciary duties;

(j) where appropriate assess the current market value of the object;

(k) formulate and submit to the claimant and to the institution its advice in a written report, giving reasons, and supply a copy of the report to the Secretary of State, and

(l) formulate and submit to the Secretary of State any advice pursuant to paragraph 4 in a written report, giving reasons, and supply a copy of the report to the claimant and the institution.

Scope of Advice

8. If the Panel upholds the claim in principle, it may recommend either:

(a) the return of the object to the claimant, or

(b) the payment of compensation to the claimant, the amount being in the discretion of the Panel having regard to all relevant circumstances including the current market value, but not tied to that current market value, or

(c) an ex gratia payment to the claimant, or

(d) the display alongside the object of an account of its history and provenance during and since the Nazi era, with special reference to the claimant's interest therein; and

(e) that negotiations should be conducted with the successful claimant in order to implement such a recommendation as expeditiously as possible.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

9. When advising the Secretary of State under paragraph 4(a) and/or (b), the Panel shall be free to recommend any action which they consider appropriate, and in particular may, under paragraph 4(a), direct the attention of the Secretary of State to the need for legislation to alter the powers and duties of any institution.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Complaints Authority

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what recent representations he has received concerning the independence of the Police Complaints Authority from the police that they investigate; [118586]

(2) what plans he has to increase the Police Complaints Authority's independence from the police that they investigate. [118587]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary receives many representations about the investigation of complaints against the police and the need for greater independence in the process. Although the Police Complaints Authority, which oversees the complaints process, is fully independent of the police, the present arrangements rely on police officers to carry out investigations. We recognise that a complaints system with a stronger independent element in the process would do much to bolster public confidence.

In line with recommendations made by the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, we commissioned a feasibility study, which we intend to publish shortly. We will, at the same time, invite public comments on the options which have been identified for achieving such a system.

Proxy Voters

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the parliamentary constituencies at the 1997 General Election ranked from highest to lowest by *(a)* number of proxy voters and *(b)* proxy voters as a percentage of registered electors. [118381]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The lists of parliamentary constituencies ranked by number of persons who appointed proxies to vote on their behalf at the 1997 general election and those persons as a percentage of registered electors have been placed in the Library.

Charles Kray

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the body of Charles Kray will be released for burial intact. [118878]

Mr. Boateng: I understand that the coroner released the body for burial on 7 April after a post-mortem examination had been carried out on his instructions. No organs or other body parts were retained.

Criminal Records

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of incorrect information from criminal record files provided in response to employment inquiries have been reported to police forces in the last year for which figures are available. [118870]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Such information is not available centrally. We recognise that there are shortcomings in the accuracy of records, which need to be addressed, especially given that the Criminal Records Bureau will come into operation from July 2001 onwards. The Police Service is working to improve the accuracy of criminal records, and the Association of Chief Police Officers has produced proposals for enhancing police data handling. In addition, a report of a review by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary of data quality of criminal records information held on the Police National Computer is expected to be published in the summer.

Fraud (Prosecutions)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of fraud were prosecuted in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1999. [117761]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database shows that in England and Wales in 1997 there were 20,744 defendants prosecuted for fraud (including false accounting) offences. In 1998, the figure was 23,880. Provisional data for 1999 will be available in the summer.

Police Numbers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 595–96W, and his answer to the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) of 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1–3W, on the number of recruits resulting from the additional £11 million, what level of funding is being provided by his Department for *(a)* 2,000 extra recruits in 2000–01 and *(b)* 3,000 extra recruits in 2001–02; how many extra recruits will be funded by the £46 million he has announced in total for 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [118847]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave on 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 595–96W.

Young Offenders (Bullying)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent changes there have been in young offenders' institutions to deal with bullying; if such changes have been effective; and if he will make a statement. [118875]

Mr. Boateng: The most recent change in young offender institutions has been the introduction of Prison Service Order 1702 which was issued in July 1999, a copy of which is in the Library. The Order requires that each establishment has a written anti-bullying strategy and an anti-bullying co-ordinator in place. In addition, each establishment must provide a copy of their strategy to Prison Service headquarters. On 11 April 2000, 55 written strategies had been reviewed by Prison Service headquarters; of these, 10 were from young offender institutions.

The positive action already being taken by establishments will convey to all prisoners that the Prison Service takes the problem of bullying seriously. The

Prison Service is confident that the development of the local strategies, together with improved training for staff, will reduce bullying in young offender institutions.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what allegations have been received by his Department of bullying at young offenders' institutions in the last two years; and if he will make a statement. [118876]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested cannot be obtained from the centrally available data without incurring disproportionate costs.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many suicides have occurred in the past two years in young offenders' institutions; and if he will list the institutions. [118877]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the table.

Young offender institutions	*Number of self-inflicted deaths* 1998	1999
Aylesbury	0	3
Castington	0	1
Deerbolt	0	0
Dover	0	0
Feltham	0	0
Glen Parva	2	1
Guys Marsh	0	0
Hatfield	0	0
Huntercombe	0	0
Onley	0	0
Portland	0	1
Reading	3	0
Stoke Heath	0	1
Swinfen Hall	0	0
Thorn Cross	0	0
Wetherby	0	1

Notes:

1. Establishments have been categorised according to their primary role. However, it should be noted that there are a number of other prisons that hold young offenders (eg male remand centres) which are not included.
2. Not all self-inflicted deaths conclude with a verdict of suicide.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Asylum Appeals

Mr. Cox: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many asylum appeal cases were awaiting a hearing on 1 April. [118492]

Jane Kennedy: At the end of March 2000 there were no arrears of work before the adjudicators. All the cases in the system (some 3,500 at the end of February) were at the appropriate stage of preparation for hearing or promulgation of the decision.

At the end of February, the Immigration Appeal Tribunal had 2,000 cases awaiting hearing. By the end of April all backlog cases which were awaiting a hearing date will have been heard and all new cases will be listed for hearing within five weeks.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of persons over state pension age who are not entitled to a winter fuel payment because they have not paid sufficient national insurance contributions to receive a state pension and who do not receive another qualifying benefit. [118917]

Mr. Rooker: Arrangements are now in place to make winter fuel payments to people aged 60 and over who satisfy the qualifying conditions, regardless of whether they are in receipt of state retirement pension or other social security benefits.

Jobseekers

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people are registered as looking for work and claiming only national insurance credits in each region of the UK, broken down by sex; and of these how many are aged *(a)* over and *(b)* under 50 years. [118758]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Jobseekers Allowance claimants in receipt of national insurance credits only by Government Office Region by sex and age: Great Britain November 1999

Thousand

	All cases		*Female*		*Male*	
	Under 50	*50 and over*	*Under 50*	*50 and over*	*Under 50*	*50 and over*
Great Britain	67.1	40.9	24.9	11.7	42.1	29.2
North	4.2	2.9	1.1	0.6	3.1	2.3
North West	9.3	4.7	3.1	1.2	6.2	3.5
Yorks and Humber	7.0	4.3	2.8	1.0	4.2	3.3
East Midlands	3.9	2.5	1.6	0.7	2.2	1.8
West Midlands	5.8	4.4	2.4	1.4	3.5	3.0
Eastern	4.8	3.2	1.7	1.1	3.1	2.1
London	9.4	4.2	3.3	1.5	6.2	2.7
South East	6.4	3.7	2.6	0.9	3.8	2.8
South West	5.2	2.8	2.3	0.9	2.9	1.9
Wales	3.7	2.9	1.2	0.8	2.5	2.1
Scotland	7.2	5.2	2.8	1.5	4.4	3.7

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and shown in thousands.
2. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample.
3. Figures for Northern Ireland can be obtained from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

DEFENCE

Departmental Estate

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many empty houses are owned by his Department in the United Kingdom; how many of them have been empty for over six months; and if he will make a statement. [118062]

Dr. Moonie: As at 29 February 2000, the Defence Housing Executive held a stock of 61,936 married quarters in England, Scotland and Wales, of which 47,385 were occupied and 3,719 were in the course of disposal. Of the balance of 10,832 empty properties, 3,507 were under offer to service families, most of which are likely to be occupied within the next two months. 1,145 were vacant awaiting further unit deployments or use as decant accommodation during refurbishment programmes. 1,652 properties were empty awaiting modernisation and 4,528 were routine voids, that is a working management margin for some 22,000 family moves each year.

Including properties identified for disposal, approximately 8,300 have been empty for more than six months.

Over 6,500 properties are planned for disposal during the next two years. Most of the MOD housing stock in England and Wales is owned by Annington Homes and is underleased by the MOD. Properties identified as having no long-term requirement to the Department are released to that company under the terms of the contract agreed in November 1996 by the previous Administration. Surplus MOD owned properties are sold by Defence Estates.

In Northern Ireland, a further 3,235 married quarters are owned by the MOD, of which 473 were empty as at 31 March 2000 and 236 had been empty for over six months.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many weapons of mass destruction are held in the United Kingdom. [118537]

Mr. Hoon: I have nothing to add to the information on our minimum nuclear deterrent set out in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review.

The UK has no biological or chemical weapons. As made clear in the 1999 Ministry of Defence publication, "Defending Against the Threat from Biological and Chemical Weapons", the UK gave up its offensive biological and chemical capabilities in the 1950s. A copy of the publication is in the Library of the House.

National Missile Defence System

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 4 April 2000,*Official Report*, column 400W, if, in his discussions with the US Defense Secretary or the Deputy Defense Secretary, he *(a)* indicated UK (i) opposition to or (ii) support for the proposed national missile defence system and *(b)* offered UK co-operation over the proposed system. [118317]

Mr. Hoon: The US has not asked for UK assistance in the deployment of the proposed National Missile Defence system, nor would we expect them to do so until after a US decision on whether or not to proceed with its deployment. In my discussions with the US Administration on the subject, I have made it clear that the UK would consider any such request carefully. I have also welcomed the fact that the US will make their deployment decision on the basis of a number of important factors, which will include taking account of the views of Allies and the status of the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Performance Targets

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made by his Department in its strategic environmental appraisal of the Strategic Defence Review; and if he will make a statement. [119123]

Dr. Moonie: The study phase of the strategic environmental appraisal has now been completed. My Department is reviewing its recommendations and I intend to publish the report in the near future.

Serle's House

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if an economic option appraisal was conducted by his Department before making the decision to put Serle's House on the open market; and if he will make a statement. [118914]

Dr. Moonie: I can confirm that a full investment appraisal and cost-benefit analysis was conducted before the decision to dispose of Serle's House was taken.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what will be the cost of moving the Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum from Serle's House to the Guard Room in Upper Peninsula Barracks; who will bear this cost; and if he will make a statement. [118923]

Dr. Moonie: The cost of moving the Western Headquarters of the Princess of Wales' Royal Regiment and the Regimental Museum of the Royal Hampshire Regiment from their current home in Serle's House to the Guard Room in Upper Peninsula Barracks has been costed at approximately £317,000, which will cover the refurbishment of the new site and the cost of removals. This cost will be borne by the Adjutant General's Top Level Budged and offset departmentally by the disposal receipt.

RAF Finningley

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how much Government funding *(a)* was spent in the last 12 months and *(b)* is planned to be spent in the next 12 months on construction work at the former RAF base at Finningley; [118688]

(2) on what basis Defence Estates is procuring construction work at the former RAF base at Finningley; [118690]

(3) what work is to be carried out by Defence Estates at the former RAF base at Finningley. [118689]

Dr. Moonie: The RAF Finningley site was sold to Peel Holdings in June 1999, at which point my Department ceased to have any involvement with it. No central government funding has been spent in the last 12 months on construction work at the former RAF Finningley, nor will be spent in the next 12 months.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Horn of Africa

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the famine in Ethiopia. [118040]

Clare Short: The situation in Ethiopia is serious. Ethiopia is a very poor country with a GDP of $110 per capita. Many Ethiopians are partially dependent on food aid in most years. This is the third year in succession when the early rains have either failed or been poor. Ethiopia has also been engaged in a war with Eritrea since May 1998. The war has disrupted Ethiopia's economic and social progress. It has also affected food security by diverting trucking capacity and increasing costs; denying access to the ports of Massawa and Assab; and denying rural households supplementary income sources in Eritrea and Tigray. As a result, eight million people now face serious food shortages. According to the information we have available, Ethiopia's initial appeal for 758,000MT of cereals is almost fully met. Britain has provided £4.5 million of food and non-food bilateral assistance this year. We have provided more bilateral food aid this year than any European donor and we will contribute 17 per cent. of the 432,000 metric tonnes which will be provided through the EC this year.

Cyclone Hudah

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the effect of cyclone Hudah on *(a)* the flooding in Mozambique and *(b)* Madagascar. [118097]

Clare Short: Cyclone Hudah has not affected the previously flooded areas in southern and central Mozambique. The cyclone made landfall in Pembane in northern Mozambique late on Friday 7 April. Preliminary assessments indicate very limited damage to property and while there has been some localised flooding this has not been exceptional. Full assessments will be completed over the coming days, but it appears there are no outstanding needs at this time.

The cyclone had previously caused considerable damage while tracking across the North East of Madagascar. As a result, there are an estimated 100,000 people requiring immediate assistance. My Department has already provided some £600,000 for immediate relief to those affected by Cyclones Eline and Gloria. We will continue to monitor the situation closely in collaboration with operational agencies on the ground and the British Embassy in Antananarivo and stand ready to respond following completed assessments.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the need for emergency aid for Madagascar after the recent hurricane. [118042]

Clare Short: My officials have maintained close contact with our Embassy in Antananarivo and operational agencies on the ground. There are an estimated 100,000 people requiring emergency assistance as a result of cyclone Hudah. Following the previous two cyclones, Gloria and Eline, effective co-ordination mechanisms were established and the United Nations and Red Cross have been supporting the Government of Madagascar to respond to relief needs.

My Department has already provided some £600,000 for immediate relief to those affected by cyclones Eline and Gloria. This support has been channelled through United Nations Children's Fund, for water sanitation and health activities; and the World Food Programme for food and delivery of relief items to isolated communities. However, due to the increase in the number of people requiring assistance these resources may run out quicker than planned. We stand ready to respond further, pending completion of detailed assessments.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make future aid programmes to Zimbabwe conditional on respect for democracy and human rights. [118047]

Clare Short: Good governance and human rights are among the factors taken into account in formulating strategy in all country programmes. Our Zimbabwe country strategy published in 1999 makes clear our position in relation to Zimbabwe.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs concerning the suspension of aid to Zimbabwe. [118053]

Clare Short: I have been keeping the development programme for Zimbabwe under very close review since 1997, taking full account of other Departments views. It is the Government's view that it would not help the poor in Zimbabwe to suspend our aid programme. We are disbursing less than half the aid that our published Country Strategy Paper makes clear would be available if the Zimbabwe Government showed a commitment to better governance and economic policies that would benefit the country and improve the life of the poor of Zimbabwe.

TREASURY

Business Tax

Mr. St.Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the Treasury estimate of business tax based on the OECD definition as a share of GDP in *(a)* UK, *(b)* France and *(c)* Germany in the latest year for which figures are available. [118643]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The latest OECD figures for tax on business as a share of GDP, for the UK, France and Germany, are published in the OECD publication "Revenue Statistics: 1965/98". A copy of this document is available in the House Library.

Public Debt Interest Payments

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the reduction in public debt interest payments resulting from a *(a)* 2 per cent., *(b)* 3 per cent., *(c)* 4 per cent. and *(d)* 5 per cent reduction in interest rates over a period of three years. [118096]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Because of the wider economic consequences of such large interest rate movements, the impact on inflation and Government borrowing would give rise to indirect changes to debt interest payments which are difficult to predict both in magnitude and direction.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

24. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Solicitor-General what assessment he has made of the work of the Crown Prosecution Service in co-operating with police and judicial authorities to speed up the completion of court cases. [117755]

The Solicitor-General: Since my appointment as Solicitor-General, I have visited many Crown Prosecution Service offices throughout England and Wales. The people I speak to, and the reports I receive, confirm that the CPS continues to co-operate closely with the police and the courts in bringing a high proportion of cases to a speedy conclusion and, wherever possible, at the first hearing. These improvements have involved a significant change in the working practices for many CPS staff which, I am pleased to report, they have undertaken with enthusiasm and professionalism.

25. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Solicitor-General what estimate he has made of the costs to the Crown Prosecution Service of the closure of local magistrates courts in the last year for which figures are available. [117757]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service does not gather information on any costs (or savings) incurred from the closure of local magistrates courts.

26. **Mr. Jenkins:** To ask the Solicitor-General what progress he has made on the review of the code for crown prosecutors. [117759]

The Solicitor-General: The review team has now been established, and met for the first time on 5 April. Consultation has begun: the team has written to a large number of organisations and individuals with an interest in the criminal justice system, asking for comments on the existing Code. Local consultation is being led by Chief Crown Prosecutors, who will report their findings to the review team. Information about the Code review has been put on the CPS website, together with an invitation to the general public to e-mail or write to the CPS with comments on the Code. The Director aims to publish the new Code in early September.

27. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the efficiency of the Crown Prosecution Service. [117760]

The Solicitor-General: In the year ending December 1999, the CPS secured convictions in respect of 98.3 per cent. (980,729) of defendants in magistrates courts, whose case proceeded to a hearing. In the Crown court, convictions were secured in respect of a further 88.4 per cent. (67,352) of defendants.

The CPS have worked closely with the police and courts to implement the Narey and Crime and Disorder Act provisions to bring offenders to court, in many cases the day after charge. In most of England and Wales, at least 60 per cent. of cases are now completed at the first hearing.

The CPS is also developing local plans to implement new criminal justice units with the police to handle cases in magistrates courts more efficiently and new trial units which will allow the CPS to shift the balance of its resources in favour of the most serious cases in the Crown court.

Sentences (Driving Offences)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Solicitor-General how many unduly lenient sentences the Attorney General has referred to the Court of Appeal in the past five years which relate to driving offences. [117758]

The Solicitor-General: The number of sentences referred to the Court of Appeal in cases which concerned either causing death by dangerous driving or causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs is as follows:

1995—five sentences;

1996—11 sentences;

1997—one sentence;

1998—five sentences;

1999—three sentences.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Select Committees

Mr. White: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, how many specialist advisers have been appointed by each Select Committee; and what were the associated costs since May 1997. [118349]

Mr. Darvill: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, how much has been spent on overseas travel by each Select Committee since May 1997. [118360]

Mr. Kirkwood: The information sought by the hon. Members is contained in the Sessional Returns ordered to be printed by the House on 25 January 1999 (HC142) and on 16 December 1999 (HC1). The returns contain comprehensive information about Select Committee activity costs and costs which the hon. Members may find useful.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Imported Livestock (Hygiene)

10. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on food hygiene standards in respect of livestock imported into the UK from France. [117741]

Mr. Morley: Livestock imported into the United Kingdom from France and from other member states must be certified in accordance with harmonised rules for

intra-Community trade. Random, non-discriminatory documentary, physical and identity checks are carried out on such imports. Thereafter, livestock entering the United Kingdom is subject to the same legislation as livestock reared here.

Pig Industry

11. **Mr. Hope:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action the Government are taking to support British pig farmers and the pig industry. [117742]

Ms Quin: At the 30 March Agriculture summit my right hon. Friend the Minister announced that the Government have decided to introduce a pig industry restructuring scheme. This three year scheme, which has been formally notified to the European Commission and we await its clearance, will make available £26 million to pig producers in its first year. The aim of the scheme will be to help pig producers reduce breeding capacity, reduce costs, overcome any competitive disadvantage and restore long term viability.

My Department has also helped the pig industry through the Agriculture Development Scheme and through measures to promote pigmeat consumption and to tackle misleading labelling.

Climate Change

12. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the effects of global warming and climate change on British food production. [117743]

Mr. Morley: Like many business sectors, agriculture will need to adapt to the effects of changing climatic conditions. Last month, my Department published a booklet summarising a £6 million research programme we have commissioned into the impact of climate change on all sectors of agriculture. The booklet also suggests practical ways in which farm management can adapt.

Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill

13. **Mr. Shaw:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received in support of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. [117744]

Mr. Morley: In excess of 2,000 representations have been received from members of the public and animal welfare organisations supporting the banning of fur farming.

Farming (New Entrants)

14. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to help new entrants to the farming sector. [117745]

Ms Quin: The Action Plan for Farming announced at the Agriculture Summit on 30 March will help create a long-term perspective for farming which will be of benefit to both existing farmers and new entrants. In addition, measures under the England Rural Development Plan announced in December will be targeted at new entrants where appropriate.

Agriculture Summit

15. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on measures announced as a result of the Prime Minister's agricultural summit. [117746]

Mr. Nick Brown: A wide cross section of farming and food industry interests were represented at the Prime Minister's meeting on 30 March. There has been a good deal of interest in the outcome of the meeting.

Distant-water Trawlermen

16. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about compensation for distant-water trawlermen. [117747]

Mr. Morley: The case for providing compensation for former distant water trawlermen is being given urgent consideration and a decision is expected shortly.

Agenda 2000

17. **Ms Ryan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the savings to consumers from the Agenda 2000 reform of the common agricultural policy. [117748]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Tynan) on 16 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 307W.

Farmers (Business Support)

18. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what business support he is offering to farmers. [117749]

Ms Quin: The Action Plan for Farming announced on 30 March provides help for farmers in relation to diversification, the use of IT, and training and other steps to develop better business practices including £6.5 million which has been allocated to deliver tailored business advice through the Small Business Service.

Dairy Farmers

19. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what help he is providing for dairy farmers. [117750]

Ms Quin: The Plan for Farming announced on 30 March indicated that we would be paying around £22 million in agrimonetary compensation to dairy farmers this year. Dairy farmers will also benefit from any raising of the maximum weight limit under the Over-Thirty-Months Scheme. It also included the removal of dairy hygiene charges in England. In addition, my right hon. Friend announced last autumn the deferral of cattle passport charges worth some £12 million in total to dairy farmers.

Common Fisheries Policy

20. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list his priorities for the review of the common fisheries policy of 2002. [117751]

Mr. Morley: The Government are pursuing a wide-ranging agenda of improvements to the Common Fisheries Policy. Our priorities include maintaining six and 12 mile limits, improving the integration of environmental policy into the CFP and introducing a greater regional dimension into decision-making.

Farm Incomes

Ms Keeble: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to address the level of farm incomes. [117739]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Government recognise the serious problems facing the farming industry. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister hosted a meeting on 30 March with farming and food industry leaders to determine a strategy for the future. A copy of the "Action Plan for Farming", discussed at the meeting, has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the items in his Department's budget on which planned expenditure was reduced by over £100,000 in financial year 1999–2000 and in each of the previous three financial years. [117972]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The information requested by the hon. Member could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the amount of agri-monetary compensation *(a)* claimed by the UK in (i) 1997–98 (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000 and *(b)* that the Government intend to claim in 2000–01. [117971]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The approximate figures are set out as follows for the following CAP scheme years:

Scheme year	*£ million*
1997	85
1998	48
1999	264

Because payments relate to scheme years, some of the expenditure falls between calendar years.

In addition, we intend to pay £154 million in 2000 and £44 million in 2001. This is subject to exchange rates remaining as they are, and approval of new schemes by the European Commission.

UK/US Meetings

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what meetings have been held between United States Government officials and his Department in *(a)* the USA and *(b)* the UK in the last 12 months, indicating the dates and locations of the meetings and the subjects discussed. [118627]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* There have been frequent meetings between United States Government officials and MAFF officials over the last 12 months covering a range of bilateral and multilateral issues. Detailed information in the form requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Sustainable Agriculture

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the Government's policies on sustainable agriculture. [117736]

Mr. Nick Brown: In December 1999 this Government set out their long-term strategy for the development of a sustainable industry that must be competitive, diverse, flexible, responsive to consumer demands and environmentally responsible. The Plan I announced on 30 March will help steer the industry in a new direction; it will help ensure that Government and industry work together to find ways to improve profitability; and it provides financial support to ease the process of change for the hardest hit sectors. The Government continue to work to secure a more market-oriented CAP.

Agri-environment Schemes

Mr. Pollard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his Department's expenditure is on agri-environment schemes in the financial year 1999–2000. [117728]

Mr. Morley: Payments to farmers under agri-environment schemes in England in 1999–2000 are expected to be £87.4 million. The equivalent figure in 1996–97 was £44.4 million. I am pleased to say that this represents an increase of 97 per cent. over the last three years.

BSE

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make publicly available the latest progress report prepared by his Department on bovine spongiform encephalopathy. [119402]

Mr. Nick Brown: A further Progress Report on BSE in Great Britain was placed in the Library of the House today.

The report outlines the measures which have been taken to protect public health since June 1999, including legislation to establish the Food Standards Agency and to lift the retail ban on beef on the bone and beef bones. It summarises the results of action to enforce existing public health measures. An update on the number of cases of vCJD is included.

There is also a section on the protection of animal health which covers controls on animal feed.

The epidemiology section shows that the epidemic of BSE in the UK continues to decline. The number of clinically suspect cases of BSE reported in Great Britain has continued to fall and for the year to 31 December 1999 was 26.3 per cent. less than for the same period in 1998, and 46.2 per cent. less than for the same period

in 1997. A continued improvement is expected for the future. The report shows that 63 per cent. of UK herds with adult breeding cattle have never had a case of BSE, including 84 per cent. of beef suckler herds. Reported incidence also shows that herds with more than four cases of BSE account for three quarters of all BSE cases, but represent less than one eighth of all herds.

The section on the European perspective reports the first exports of UK beef produced under the Date-based Export Scheme which started in August 1999. It also covers the Commission's latest proposal for regulation to control and prevent animal transmissible spongiform encephalopathies.

Countryside and Rights of Way Bill

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from the farming unions and individuals involved in the industry on the question of the universal access proposals contained in the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill; and if he will make a statement. [118402]

Mr. Mullin: I have been asked to reply.

The Government have received representations on the access provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill from a range of organisations representing, or associated with, the farming and land management industry, including the National Farmers Union, the Farmers' Union of Wales, the Tenant Farmers Association, and the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs. We have also received representations from a number of individual farmers and others involved in farming. To provide details of representations from individuals would involve disproportionate cost.

Feed Supplements

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what assessment he has made of the effect on the feed supplements sector in the UK of Regulation 13 of the Feedings Stuffs Regulations 2000; and if he will make a statement; [115388]

(2) when he will reach a decision on whether to proceed to implement Regulation 13 of the Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000; and if he will make a statement; [115389]

(3) what assessment he has made of the effect of Regulation 13 of the Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000 on competition in the European feed supplements sector; and if he will make a statement. [115390]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

The consultation on the draft Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000 specifically requested comments on the proposed Regulation 13 in order that its effect on all sectors could be assessed.

There have been a substantial number of responses and some of these have drawn attention to comparisons with the European feed supplement practices. The Government's response will be drawn up taking account of all the issues raised in consultation, and a decision announced shortly.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Short Money

Mr. Kemp: To ask the President of the Council what steps she takes to ensure that Short money allocated to Her Majesty's Opposition is used exclusively for parliamentary purposes. [118873]

Mrs. Beckett: Recipients of Short money have to furnish the Accounting Officer of the House with the certificate of an independent professional auditor, in a form determined by the Accounting Officer, to the effect that all expenses in respect of which the party received financial assistance during the period ending with that day were incurred exclusively in relation to the party's parliamentary business under the House's resolution.

Mr. Kemp: To ask the President of the Council how much Short money has been allocated to Her Majesty's Official Opposition for each of the last six years. [118874]

Mrs. Beckett: The figures are as follows:

	£
1994	1,439,802.97
1995	1,489,749.12
1996	1,530,190.51
1997	986,762.82
1998	1,112,885.74
1999	3,377,670.28

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

United Biscuits

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will refer the bid by Finalrealm for United Biscuits to the Competition Commission; and if he will make a statement. [117610]

Dr. Howells: The size and European dimension of this proposed bid for United Biscuits means that it has fallen to the consideration of the European competition authorities under the EC Merger Regulation (ECMR). The European Commission assesses such cases on competition grounds and member states have a formal role in the ECMR process.

Ilisu Dam Project

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment his Department has made of *(a)* the number of British jobs that will be created, *(b)* the number of existing British jobs that may be sustained, *(c)* which other countries expect to have jobs created, *(d)* the number of jobs that will be created for persons from other countries, *(e)* the number of jobs that will be created for local people and *(f)* the ratio of jobs for local people to jobs that will be available for persons from other countries, including in Britain, as a result of the Ilisu Dam project by Balfour Beatty Construction. [118029]

Mr. Caborn: Contractual negotiations on the Ilisu project are still progressing and therefore we do not have the detailed information sought by my hon. Friend.

Indeed, such information normally becomes available only some time after contract signature. However, I can say that

it is estimated that in the region of 2,000 jobs in Britain could be sustained;

other countries where export credit agencies are considering support are: Switzerland, the USA, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Austria, and Portugal;

other countries may be involved as sub contractors;

the potential UK goods and services represent around 10–12 per cent. of the total project cost;

around half the value of civil works will be expended locally;

the contractor has advised us that the peak work force on site—most of whom will be local—will be around 5,000 and that the construction period will be approximately seven years.

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which banks are investing in the Ilisu Dam project; and what discussions his Department *(a)* has had and *(b)* is planning to have concerning the project. [118030]

Mr. Caborn: We understand that a lending syndicate would be led by UBS of Switzerland. As no decision has been taken on the availability of export credit support, discussions have not yet commenced on the financing. If and when a decision is taken to provide support, ECGD will discuss the project with the lending syndicate as part of its normal procedures.

Astra

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library file bundles 120, 121, 140 and 141 in the Astra case. [118393]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 611W. It is well established that material obtained through the use of compulsory powers is subject to duties of confidentiality. Disclosure can be made only in certain circumstances and for certain specified purposes. While I am unable to make such material available to the Library of the House, the inspectors' concluded views were set out in their report published in June 1993.

Employment and Tribunal Claims

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many employment and tribunal claims in *(a)* Wales, *(b)* England and *(c)* Scotland in each year from 1995 to 2000 in (i) sex discrimination, (ii) equal pay, (iii) race discrimination and (iv) disability discrimination cases (A) were lodged, (B) were settled through ACAS, (C) were privately settled, (D) were withdrawn, (E) reached a hearing and (F) were successful at hearing; what was the distribution of compensation awards in successful cases separately distinguishing compensation for injury to feelings; and how many individuals were represented at tribunals. [118736]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The following tables set out the information requested. The statistics are produced on a Great Britain basis.

Table showing the number of cases registered according to jurisdiction

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Sex Discrimination	2,880	[1]—	3,440	6,203
Equal Pay	1,482	[1]—	1,845	5,018
Racial Discrimination	1,774	[1]—	2,578	2,746
Disability Discrimination	n/a	[1]—	959	1,430

[1] Due to changes to the database system of the ETS in 1996, statistics are not available for 1996–97.
n/a = DDA Act did not come into force until 2 December 1996

Table showing the number of cases disposed of and the respective outcomes according to jurisdiction.

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Sex Discrimination				
Cases disposed of	3,677	[1]—	2,839	4,025
ACAS settled	1,464	[1]—	1,005	1,791
Withdrawn or privately settled	1,508	[1]—	1,070	1,334
Reached a hearing	574	[1]—	676	797
(of which) successful	218	[1]—	224	270
Equal Pay				
Number of cases	694	[1]—	1,483	1,530
ACAS settled	128	[1]—	253	517
Withdrawn or privately settled	456	[1]—	1,069	650
Reached a hearing	82	[1]—	91	316
(of which) successful	36	[1]—	18	7
Racial Discrimination				
Number of cases	1,737	[1]—	2,194	2,694
ACAS settled	405	[1]—	661	813
Withdrawn or privately settled	656	[1]—	727	871
Reached a hearing	562	[1]—	653	837
(of which) successful	109	[1]—	119	131
Disability Discrimination				
Number of cases	n/a	[1]—	337	858
ACAS settled	n/a	[1]—	140	365
Withdrawn or privately settled	n/a	[1]—	123	284
Reached a hearing	n/a	[1]—	69	189
(of which) successful	n/a	[1]—	4	33

[1] Due to changes to the database system of the ETS in 1996, statistics are not available for 1996–97
n/a = DDA Act did not come into force until 2 December 1996
Note:
It should be noted that the ETS statistical years follow the financial, not calendar years and as yet, the statistics for 1999–2000 are being collated and are not available.

Table showing compensation levels by jurisdiction and year

	Award			
	less than £499	*£500–£2,499*	*£2,500–£6,999*	*greater than £7,000*
1995–96				
Sex Discrimination	13	31	18	15
Equal Pay	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Racial Discrimination	3	16	4	9
Disability Discrimination	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1996–97				
Sex Discrimination	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Equal Pay	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Racial Discrimination	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Disability Discrimination	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
1997–98				
Sex Discrimination	12	47	47	28
Equal Pay	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Racial Discrimination	2	22	20	35
Disability Discrimination	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
1998–99				
Sex Discrimination	7	47	56	54
Equal Pay	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Racial Discrimination	2	18	24	28
Disability Discrimination	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Statistics on Equal Pay and Disability Discrimination cases are not collated separately.
[2] Due to changes to the database system of the ETS in 1996, statistics are not available for 1996–97
n/a = DDA Act did not come into force until 2 December 1996
Note:
Statistics on compensation awards for injury to feeling are included in the above details but can not be separately identified.

Table showing representation at the employment tribunals—for applicants

Year	*None or Self*[1]	*Other*	*Legal*	*Union*
1995–96	10,342	3,983	4,520	2,374
1996–97	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
1997–98	11,579	2,532	4,142	1,814
1998–99	9,413	2,743	4,545	4,223

[1] Includes cases where the parties failed to attend.
[2] Due to changes to the database system of the ETS in 1996, statistics are not available for 1996–97.
Source:
ETS—April 2000

Personal Computers

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will ask the Competition Commission to review the retail personal computer market, with particular reference to exclusive supply arrangements; [118565]

(2) if he will seek a meeting with representatives from the Dixons group of stores to discuss their exclusive supply arrangements with manufacturers of personal computers; and if he will make a statement. [118566]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition law in the first instance it is the responsibility of the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) to investigate allegations of anti-competitive behaviour and possible abuses of a dominant position.

The Office of Fair Trading announced on 10 April that it would be seeking further information from those that have raised concerns about this market, and will be meeting with them shortly.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will refer the retail market for personal computers to the Competition Commission; and if he will make a statement. [118583]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition law in the first instance it is the responsibility of the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) to investigate allegations of anti-competitive behaviour and possible abuses of a dominant position.

The Office of Fair Trading announced on 10 April that it would be seeking further information from those that have raised concerns about this market.

Miners' Pension Funds

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the names of the trustees of the miners pensions funds, giving the date of their appointment and the length of their term in office. [118744]

Mrs. Liddell: The Mineworkers Pension Scheme (MPS) has 10 Trustees, while the British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme (BCSSS) has eight. Half of the Trustees in each Scheme, including the Chairmen, are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in his role as Guarantor to the Schemes. The remaining Trustees are elected by the Scheme membership. Details are as follows:

British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme
Appointed Trustees

Mrs. S. Gleig (Chair)—appointed for three years to 30 April 2000
Mr. R. Dennis—appointed for three years to 30 April 2000
Mr. D. Brandick—appointed for three years to 30 April 2000
Mr. M. Atkinson—appointed for three years to 31 December 2001

Elected Trustees

Mr. B. Hancock—elected for three years to 30 September 2000

Mr. D. McIntosh—elected for three years to 30 September 2000

Mr. S. Jukes—elected for three years to 31 March 2002

Dr. R. Chappell—elected for three years to 31 March 2002

Mineworkers Pension Scheme

Appointed Trustees

Mr. N. Braithwaite (Chair)—appointed from 1 September 1999 to 13 February 2003

Mr. D. H. Tucker—appointed for three years to 13 February 2003

Mr. P. J. Keenan—appointed from 6 October 1998 to 30 September 2001

Mrs S. Gleig—appointed from 6 October 1998 to 30 April 2000

Mr. M. Atkinson—appointed for three years to 31 December 2002

Elected Trustees

Mr. J. Perry—elected for three years to 31 March 2002

Mr. J. Stones—elected for three years to 31 March 2002

Mr. G. Bolton—elected for three years to 30 September 2000

Mr. N. Greatrex—elected for three years to 30 September 2000

Mr. J. Wills—elected for three years to 31 March 2002.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received from the trustees of the miners' pension funds concerning arrangements for the showing of surpluses between Government and beneficiaries. [118745]

Mrs. Liddell: I met the Chairmen of the Trustees of the coal pension schemes (the British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme and the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme) recently and discussed how the Government and Trustees could build on the arrangements put in place at privatisation to the mutual benefit of both Scheme members and the Government. These discussions are continuing.

Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the total amount paid by his Department for the miners' compensation scheme for chest diseases and vibration white finger *(a)* to solicitors, *(b)* in interim payments to miners and *(c)* as final settlement with miners. [118743]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 9 April the Department has made payments for chest diseases amounting to:

£13.2 million to solicitors, including £9.8 million in trial costs;

£50.6 million in interim and bereavement award payments; and

£5.4 million in final settlements.

As at 9 April the Department has made payments for Vibration White Finger amounting to:

£12.1 million to solicitors, including £4.4 million in trial costs;

£25.4 million in interim payments; and

£55.1 million in final settlements.

Energy Prices

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the average cost of *(a)* 650 therms of gas and *(b)* 8,000 units of electricity to consumers (i) paying by direct debit and (ii) paying by means of a pre-payment meter in each of the last 10 years, excluding the last 12 months for which figures are available. [118365]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The information to produce estimates of costs on this basis for the last ten years is not readily available. Estimates of these costs for the years for which this information is available (1998 and 1999) are given in Table 1 as are equivalent bills for customers on standard credit terms. The majority of customers are still on standard credit terms. The available information on bills for earlier years is presented in Table 2. This is based on different levels of consumption to those stated in the question.

Table 1: Estimated annual electricity and gas bills for domestic consumers [1]

Cash terms (£)

	Payment method		
	Standard quarterly credit	*Monthly direct debit*	*Pre-payment meter*
Gas (650 therms)			
1998	331	292	349
1999[2]	320	281	336
Electricity (8,000 kWh)			
1998	600	580	611
1999[2]	594	574	608

[1] Average UK bills, including VAT
[2] Provisional

Table 1a: Estimated annual electricity and gas bills for domestic consumers [1]

Real terms 1999 prices [2] *(£)*

	Payment method		
	Standard quarterly credit	*Monthly direct debit*	*Pre-payment meter*
Gas (650 therms)			
1998	329	289	345
1999[3]	320	281	336
Electricity (8,000 kWh)			
1998	610	590	624
1999[3]	594	574	608

[1] Average UK bills, including VAT
[2] Real 1999 terms calculated using the GDP (market prices) deflator
[3] Provisional

Table 2: Estimated gas and electricity bills for domestic consumers

Cash terms [1] *(£)*

	Payment method		
	Standard quarterly credit	*Monthly direct debit* [2]	*Pre-payment meter*
Gas (18,000kWh, 614 Therms)			
1990	285	n/a	303
1995	327	311	347
1996	330	308	350
1997	328	307	348
1998	315	277	331
1999[3]	305	267	318
Electricity (3,300kWh)			
1990	245	n/a	264
1995	300	295	319
1996	297	295	317
1997	285	277	302
1998	268	258	285
1999[3]	265	256	282

[1] Average UK bills, including VAT where payable, VAT was charged at 8 per cent. from 1994 and at 5 per cent. from September 1997
[2] The monthly direct debit payment method was not widely available in 1990
[3] Provisional

Table 2a: Estimated gas and electricity bills for domestic consumers

Real 1999 terms [1] (£)

	Payment method		
	Standard quarterly credit	*Monthly direct debit [2]*	*Pre-payment meter*
Gas (18,000kWh, 614 Therms)			
1990	381	n/a	405
1995	368	350	391
1996	360	336	381
1997	348	325	369
1998	324	285	340
1999[3]	305	267	318
Electricity (3,300kWh)			
1990	328	n/a	354
1995	337	332	359
1996	324	322	345
1997	302	294	320
1998	275	265	293
1999[3]	265	255	282

[1] Real 1999 terms calculated using the GDP (market prices) deflator
[2] The monthly direct debit payment method was not widely available in 1990
[3] Provisional

TrustUK

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how the consumer launch of TrustUK will be promoted to UK consumers. [118775]

Dr. Howells: The consumer launch is being handled by TrustUK who are currently exploring options and developing a media planning strategy. The launch will take place in central London.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the consumer launch of TrustUK will take place. [118776]

Dr. Howells: The consumer launch is expected to take place in June.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the consumer protection provided by the monitoring standards set out in TrustUK. [118777]

Dr. Howells: TrustUK's criteria require e-commerce code owners to carry out effective monitoring to ensure that traders comply with the codes to which they subscribe. The criteria require monitoring to be carried out independently and with integrity and objectivity. Monitoring work must be capable of being externally verified. TrustUK will be developing statistically robust monitoring techniques.

TrustUK's criteria allow a degree of flexibility as to how monitoring is performed. The Government believe this approach, combined with effective enforcement and sanctions, should provide adequate consumer protection. At the same time it gives code owners some choice about the kind of monitoring procedures they adopt. The Government believe that codes should be flexible instruments, capable of evolving in response to market developments. TrustUK is developing a transparent procedure for keeping its criteria under review.

Assisted Areas Status Map

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the reasons are for the length of time taken by the Government and the European Commission to assess the Assisted Areas Status map for the United Kingdom; and when he expects it to be published. [118938]

Mr. Caborn: We have been engaged in detailed negotiations with the Commission with a view to securing the best possible deal for the UK's Assisted Areas within the constraints set by the Commission's rules on regional aid.

The new Assisted Areas map will be published when the College of Commissioners has approved it.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Oxford Forum

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason reference to the Oxford Forum has been included in the political and economic briefing relating to the USA. [117963]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* I regret the administrative error that has led to my hon. Friend receiving an incorrect answer to his earlier question.

The Oxford Forum is a trilateral meeting of parliamentarians and experts from the UK, US and Germany. It was formed as a result of a joint initiative by President Clinton and the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) in 1995. The event has been previously held in Oxford, Berlin, Harvard and Belfast.

Party whips select the hon. Members of the delegation.

The Oxford Forum is included in the bilateral relations paragraph of the US Political and Economic brief as it forms part of the strategy to strengthen relations between parliamentarians.

European Documents

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will deposit a copy of *(a)* Commission Document, "Building an Inclusive Europe" (6715/00) and *(b)* the Presidency report, "Strengthening the Common European Security and Defence Policy", discussed at the Lisbon summit, in the Library. [118025]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security has led a policy responsibility for the areas covered in the Commission Document, "Building an Inclusive Europe" (6715/00). A copy of the document will be placed in the Library once an official version has been received.

I have arranged for a copy of the Presidency Report, "Strengthening the Common European Security and Defence Policy", to be placed in the Library.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes have been made to the implementation of EU financial sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [119401]

Mr. Vaz: EC Regulation 723/2000 amending EC Regulation 1294/1999 concerning a freeze on funds and a ban on investment in relation to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was adopted by the Council of the EU on 6 April. The Regulation, which enhances the implementation of the existing financial sanctions against the FRY, came into force on 8 April. Among other changes, it clarifies the scope of the freeze of funds by tightening the definition of "the Government of the FRY" and "the Government of the Republic of Serbia".

HEALTH

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of intensity-modulated radiotherapy against prostate cancer. [118328]

Yvette Cooper: Preliminary evidence from the United States of America indicates that intensity-modulated radiotherapy may have a role in the treatment of prostate cancer. However, this treatment is not common practice in the United Kingdom and its effectiveness has not been evaluated.

Papilloma Virus

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress of arrangements for the three human papilloma virus pilot tests due to start in the summer. [118695]

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which sites will be used for piloting human papilloma virus testing as part of the National Cervical Cancer Screening Programme. [118703]

Yvette Cooper: The Department is currently establishing an advisory group, which will oversee the commissioning and running of the pilot sites for HPV testing and provide expert advice and support on all aspects of the scope of the project. A limited competition exercise will be held in the summer to select the pilot sites, and it is anticipated they will be chosen by the autumn. Testing will begin when preparatory work at each site is complete.

BCG Vaccine

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress made in identifying an additional supplier for the BCG vaccine. [118603]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has identified other manufacturers of BCG vaccines worldwide and is investigating these possibilities together with experts from the National Institute of Biological Standards and Control, the Medicines Control Agency and National Health Service Supplies. This work is still ongoing due to the complex nature of ensuring the safety and efficacy of any alternative source. Products from different manufacturers vary in their composition. We will need to be assured of the safety and efficacy of these products, that they can satisfy current United Kingdom licensing requirements and also that supply is such that further interruptions to the programme, once reinstated, will not occur. We are not yet in a position to be able to confirm when or if an alternative source will be available.

GM Animal Feed

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure animal feed is labelled to show whether it contains genetically modified organisms. [117730]

Ms Stuart: I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that a proposed European Commission Regulation covering novel feed is expected to be presented to Council in the summer. We have been pressing for this as it should contain fair and consistent labelling rules for genetically modified material. In the meantime, the Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs is considering questions of terminology and thresholds.

Food Labelling

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures his Department is taking to ensure clear labelling of food with regard to country of origin. [117729]

Ms Stuart: Origin labelling rules are harmonised at EU level. We are actively pressing for a review of these rules, and of international guidelines, to improve the amount and clarity of origin information on food labels.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made since 1 January 2000 in labelling all food with the country of origin. [117734]

Ms Stuart: On 1 February my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food issued tough new guidance to industry and enforcement authorities emphasising the need to ensure that country of origin markings on food labels are unambiguous.

Origin labelling rules are harmonised at European Union level. We are actively pressing for a review of these rules, and of international guidelines, to improve the amount and clarity of origin information on food labels.

National Alcohol Strategy

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the full draft of the National Alcohol Strategy will be issued for consultation; and when the strategy will be published. [118374]

Yvette Cooper: The Department plans to launch a consultation paper about a National Strategy to Tackle Alcohol Misuse in England later this year. After a sufficient period for comment the strategy will be published.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 6 March, regarding a constituent (ref: POH(2) 5608/42). [118846]

Mr. Denham: I replied to my hon. Friend on 11 April.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 14 April 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Railways (Shropshire)

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by constituency the railway stations and railway lines in Shropshire which have been *(a)* closed and *(b)* opened (i) between 1979 to 1997 and (ii) since May 1997. [118540]

Mr. Hill: This information is not held in the form requested. However, I am aware that Telford Central station was opened in 1985, and that New Hadley station was closed in the same year. A freight only line from Shrewsbury Sutton Bridge to Abbey Foregate was closed in the late 1980s. The Rail Regulator has not given consent to closure of any passenger services or stations in Shropshire since the provisions of the Railway Act in 1993 came into force.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of households that will be taken out of fuel poverty by Government schemes in each of the next 15 years; and what estimate he has made of the cost of such schemes in each of the next 15 years. [118414]

Mr. Meacher: A key programme is the New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme, which with a budget of £260 million over the next two years, is currently expected to take 460,000 households out of fuel poverty. The impact of other policies on the number of fuel poor households is less clear.

We estimate the number of households in fuel poverty is currently about 4.5 million, and that at current rates of the HEES programme the great majority should be removed from fuel poverty within a decade.

Motorways

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of porous asphalt have been laid on motorways in each year since 1995. [118535]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Gordon Prentice, dated 14 April 2000:

You recently asked the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of porous asphalt have been laid on motorways in each year since 1995.

Detailed records are not held centrally by the Highways Agency but we estimate the lengths of porous asphalt laid during these years to have been as follows:

Year	*Lengths of porous asphalt laid*
1995	1.0 mile, M25 (one carriageway)
1995	0.5 miles, M1 (both carriageways)
1996	1.5 miles, M25 (one carriageway)
1997	2.3 miles, M25 (both plus carriageways), plus 1.5 miles (one carriageway)
1998	7.5 miles, M40 (both carriageways)
1999	0.2 miles, M1 (one carriageway)

Porous asphalt was introduced by the Highways Agency for use on trunk roads in 1993. At that time it was the only option available for providing a quieter road surface but was not suitable for use in all situations. Further development resulted in alternatives including proprietary quiet, thin surfacings, and in 1998, 'whisper' concrete. These two materials offer many of the advantages of porous asphalt with few of its drawbacks, not least its high cost. This has meant that porous asphalt has been little used.

The new quiet surfacings are now being used widely by the Highways Agency both for surfacing new roads and for maintaining existing roads. Their performance is very effective and in use they can often be mistaken for porous asphalt being quiet, and reducing spray in wet weather.

If it would be helpful, John Williams our road surfacings specialist, would be pleased to discuss both porous asphalt and other road surfacings in current use with you. His telephone number is 020 7921 4635.

Road Maintenance (Victoria Embankment)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason road maintenance work was permitted along the Victoria Embankment on the morning of 6 April; what assessment was made of its impact on *(a)* road congestion and *(b)* access for emergency services; what assessment was made of the option of carrying out the work at night; and if he will make a statement. [118650]

Mr. Hill: Westminster City Council is the highway authority for Victoria Embankment. I understand that, on the morning of 6 April, contractors working for Westminster City Council took down a lamp column at the junction of Northumberland Avenue and Victoria Embankment. This was required in connection with Hungerford Bridge works, but had become urgent because the lamp column appeared to be unsafe. The works involved a lorry parked across the junction and the erection of traffic cones in Northumberland Avenue and on the eastbound carriageway of Victoria Embankment.

Works of this type in the carriageway are not usually subjected to formal analysis of their effects on congestion or emergency access unless complete closure of the road is required.

Westminster City Council have advised me that it is their policy to carry out works during the working day to avoid the environmental problems caused by working at night and weekends although planned work is avoided at peak hours on traffic sensitive routes.

Ship Weights

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is

the deadweight tonnage of *(a)* UK-owned ships and *(b)* non-UK-owned ships, strategically and commercially managed in the United Kingdom. [119202]

Mr. Hill: At the end of December 1999, 1,026 trading ships were managed from the United Kingdom. Of these ships, 4.5 million deadweight tonnes were UK-owned and 29.5 million deadweight tonnes non-UK-owned.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many concessionary television licences for persons living in warden-assisted homes have been *(a)* granted and *(b)* withdrawn in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [118366]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The following information is provided by the BBC, which has statutory responsibility for the administration of the television licensing system:

Year	*Number of accommodation for residential care concessionary licences issued* [1,2]
1992–93	635,703
1993–94	655,165
1994–95	677,104
1995–96	641,136
1996–97	650,013
1997–98	651,822
1998–99	645,876
1999–2000	654,191

[1] Qualifying accommodation includes residential and nursing homes, sheltered housing schemes and almshouses.
[2] Records of concessionary television licences issued moved from a wholly manual system to a computerised system in 1996. This change highlighted the inaccuracy of the earlier system and is thought to account for much of the fall between 1994–95 and 1995–96.

A full ten-year record of the number of concessionary licences issued would require manual extraction of information from paper records in the initial years. No records are kept of the number of concessionary licences withdrawn, nor can such information be extracted from existing data, as it is not possible to distinguish between withdrawal of the concession and other reasons for non-renewal.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Special Schools

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made by the Regional Review Group established to consider the issue of therapy input to special schools; and when he expects to receive a report. [118661]

Mr. George Howarth: The Regional Review Group has drawn up an inter-agency agreement for the provision of health and social services to children in schools with special educational needs. It is currently undertaking a number of more detailed reviews of various types of health and social services provision to children with special educational needs, including therapy provision. I understand that the Group will be considering a draft report on this in early May and will also discuss the timing of its referral to the relevant Government Departments.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Land Rover

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Ford Motor Company told him that it was to buy Land Rover from BMW before the official announcement. [118698]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has many contacts with companies including the Ford Motor Company. Issues discussed are often commercially confidential.

BMW/Rover

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will place a copy of the handwritten contemporaneous note taken by officials of his 10 March meeting with Professor Samann in the Library; [118730]

(2) if the note of his 10 March meeting with Professor Samann which was placed in the Library is the only record that was made of that meeting; [118727]

(3) what briefing he received about the details of each of the 27 contacts between his Department and BMW that took place between 1 December 1999 and 31 March 2000; and if he will make available any briefing he received on those contacts; [118723]

(4) when the note of his 10 March meeting with Professor Samann, which was placed in the Library, was prepared; [118709]

(5) to whom the note of his meeting with Professor Samann on 10 March was circulated; [118728]

(6) if he will make public telegrams from *(a)* UKREP, *(b)* the Berlin Embassy and *(c)* HM Consul-General Munich relating to BMW since 23 June 1999; [118720]

(7) what advice he was given by the British Embassy in Berlin between June 1999 and March 2000 in respect of BMW/Rover; [118753]

(8) what briefing was made available to *(a)* DTI Ministers and *(b)* other Government departments about the details of any of the 27 contacts between his Department and BMW, details of which he has placed in the Library; [118718]

(9) if he will publish details of all the 27 contacts between his Department and BMW between 1 December 1999 and 31 March 2000; [118722]

(10) if the note from his PPS, dated 22 December 1999, is the only record that was made of his telephone conversation with Professor Milberg of that date. [118714]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The documents released to the Trade and Industry Committee were made available at the specific request of the Select Committee and I refer to the evidence that I gave to the Select Committee.

It has been the practice of successive Administrations not to disclose information which might undermine the long-established conventions protecting the confidentiality of the internal decision-making process. The Code of Practice on Access to Government Information recognises the need for confidentiality of internal opinion, advice, recommendation and deliberation to ensure that matters can be discussed candidly and frankly within Government.

The Code of Practice also recognises the need to protect a third party's commercial confidences.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) who requested his meeting with Professor Samann on 10 March; [118729]

(2) if the note of his 10 March meeting with Professor Samann, which was placed in the Library, is a full record of the meeting. [118717]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* I refer to my evidence given to the Trade and Industry Committee on 5 April.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make available the internal correspondence between Ministers concerning BMW, Longbridge and Rover since 23 June 1999. [118721]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* These documents contain information that is commercially sensitive.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when he first notified the Prime Minister of the deteriorating situation at Rover; [118725]

(2) when he asked his Department to notify the Prime Minister's staff of the deteriorating situation at Rover. [118726]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* My Department has been in close contact with No. 10 on this issue throughout.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when BMW first indicated to him that it was reconsidering the ownership of Rover, Longbridge. [118751]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* When I spoke to Professor Milberg on 15 March.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the standard practice of his Office in respect of making notes of his official telephone conversations. [118724]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Telephone calls are monitored and notes are made if the call contained issues of substance.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he took following his meeting on 10 March at which Professor Samann stated that there was a risk of 8,000 job losses. [118719]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* I refer to my evidence to the Trade and Industry Committee on 5 April.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what contact *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials had with Commissioner Monti between 23 June and 11 December 1999 concerning Rover's application for regional selective assistance. [118710]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* I had a number of discussions with Commissioner Monti in this period covering a range of issues including the application for aid in support of the R30.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) for what reason he telephoned Professor Milberg on 11 December 1999; [118711]

(2) for what reason no record of his conversation with Professor Milberg on 11 December 1999 was prepared; [118715]

(3) what Professor Milberg said concerning the future of Rover during his telephone conversation on 11 December 1999. [118716]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* I telephoned Professor Milberg at his home on the afternoon of Saturday 11 December. I made the call from my own home. In my evidence to the Select Committee on 15 February, I gave details of the conversation.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what discussions took place between Professor Milberg and the BMW board in January following his conversation of 22 December 1999 with Professor Milberg; [118713]

(2) what steps he took to establish if discussions had taken place between Professor Milberg and his board in January following his conversation of 22 December 1999. [118712]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* My Department monitored the situation to see if a meeting of the BMW Supervisory Board had been called. No such meeting was called in either January or February. After our telephone conversation on 22 December 1999 the first meeting of the BMW Supervisory Board was on 16 March 2000.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what was the nature of his contacts with BMW between 22 December 1999 and 10 February 2000; [118708]

(2) what contact with BMW took place between 22 December 1999 and 10 February 2000 involving *(a)* his Department's Ministers or officials, *(b)* UKREP Brussels, *(c)* the British Embassy Berlin and *(d)* HM Consul-General Munich; [118706]

(3) for what reason there is no record of his contact points with BMW between 22 December 1999 and 10 February 2000. [118707]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* My officials were in regular contact in relation to the 88(2) investigation into the aid for the R30 project during this period. They would have informed me if it had been advisable for me to contact BMW directly.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when Professor Milberg asked him to issue the statement which was distributed to the Press on the afternoon of 30 March; [118761]

(2) for what reason he issued a statement from Professor Milberg to the Press on 30 March; [118762]

(3) when he was informed that the text of the statement from Professor Milberg which he issued to the Press on 30 March was not approved by BMW; and what steps he took to inform those present at the press briefing of the official BMW Press Release of the same date. [118760]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to my supplementary evidence to the Select Committee.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the first three tranches of regional selective assistance for BMW/Rover were due to be paid under the agreement with BMW announced in June 1999. [118269]

Mr. Byers: I refer to the evidence I gave to the Trade and Industry Committee on 5 April.

Monitoring the Economy

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the report of the Panel on Monitoring the Economy following the meeting of the panel at the end of January. [118697]

Mr. Byers: Members of the Panel contribute their views frankly and in confidence to help the Government with their work. Publication of a report prepared on the same basis would be a breach of faith.

New Motor Cars

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the embargoed press release on the supply of new motor cars complied with paragraph 9.1 of his Department's Guidance on how monopoly reports are published. [119213]

Mr. Byers: No embargoed press releases were issued to the media concerning the Competition Commission report on New Cars (Cm 4660).

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Turkey (Football Deaths)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department is taking to investigate the circumstances surrounding the killing of Christopher Loftus and Kevin Speight in Istanbul on 5 April; if he will publish the report of these investigations as soon as possible; and if he will make a statement. [119046]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not have any jurisdiction to investigate these crimes. The investigation into the deaths of Christopher Loftus and Kevin Speight is a matter for the Turkish authorities. We have, however, made it very clear to the Turkish authorities the importance we attach to bringing the killers to justice. The Chief of Police in Istanbul called on the British Consul-General on 8 April to update him on the investigation. He has undertaken to continue to update our consular staff on a regular basis. Consular staff in London will keep the families informed of developments.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hilda Murrell

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 64W, whether the evidence in the case of Hilda Murrell currently with West Mercia Police has been referred to the DNA Centre in Birmingham for the purpose of matching tissue; and if he will make a statement. [119045]

Mr. Straw: I understand from the West Mercia Constabulary that a number of forensic exhibits from the Hilda Murrell case are currently with the Forensic Science Service (FSS) laboratory in Birmingham for review to identify any which might give a positive result with the new DNA techniques (Second Generation Multiplex plus and Low Copy Number systems), which have only recently become available. Discussions involving the FSS Major Crime Specialist Adviser on the strategic way ahead for this review are in progress. No DNA sequences were recovered from an earlier forensic review carried out in 1992.

Oakington Reception Centre

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current unit cost per week of keeping a detainee at Oakington; what will be the weekly unit cost per detainee when Oakington is operating at full capacity; and if he will make a statement. [119142]

Mrs. Roche: The current direct unit cost per week of an available place at the Oakington Reception Centre comes to about £1,880. This will reduce to about £527 per week when Oakington is operating at full capacity.

DEFENCE

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made with the two studies concerning defence fissile material production and a national capability for arms control verification referred to in Supporting Essay Five of the Strategic Defence Review; and if he will make a statement. [119575]

Mr. Hoon: The decision to produce by this spring an initial report of defence fissile material production since the commencement of the UK's nuclear programme in the 1940s was both ambitious and challenging. There remains much work to be done. However, I am pleased to announce that our reports on the production of plutonium for the Defence programme and arms control verification have now been completed within the timescale set out in the Strategic Defence Review. Copies of the reports, and their associated summary capping papers, will be placed in the Library of the House and published on the MOD website. I also intend to have the summary capping papers circulated at the forthcoming Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in New York, and at the Conference of Disarmament in Geneva, as a contribution to wider consideration of these complex issues. Their publication demonstrates our continuing

determination to work constructively towards our goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons, and our commitment to openness in government.

Airborne Navigation and Attack System

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on the France-UK joint co-operation on the Joint Airborne Navigation and Attack electro-optical targeting system; and if he make a statement. [117849]

Mr. Hoon: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 14 April 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about what representations he has received on the France-UK joint co-operation on the Joint Airborne Navigation and Attack electro-optical targeting system. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

I can confirm that, following a competitive invitation to tender for the Anglo-French JOANNA programme, only one tender response was received, a joint response from BAE SYSTEMS and Thomson-CSF. We are considering the tender and hope to be in a position to make a decision in the next few months.

Army Dismissal Policy

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the review of the decision of the Army not to dismiss the soldiers associated with the death of Mr. Peter McBride in 1992; [118882]

(2) what, in ruling whether a soldier should be dismissed from the Army after having served a custodial sentence, is the definition of exceptional circumstances which would justify the dismissal being waived; and if he will make a statement; [118881]

(3) if it is the practice that soldiers convicted of serious charges relating to murder and who *(a)* are facing or *(b)* have served custodial sentences are dismissed from the Army; and if he will make a statement. [118880]

Mr. Hoon: The decision of the Army Board to retain Guardsmen Fisher and Wright was recently subjected to judicial review. The Judgment of Mr. Justice Kerr quashed the earlier decision of the Army Board. The Army Board is now obliged to consider afresh the case of the two Guardsmen. This will be a completely fresh consideration and the Board members who made the previous decision will not be involved this time. In considering the case the Board will, of course, take the fullest account of all the circumstances including the content of the Judgment.

Queen's Regulations (9.404) state that a soldier is to be discharged if he has been sentenced by a civil court (or by court-martial) to imprisonment or to detention or to any other form of custodial sentence.

Queen's Regulations (9.404) also state that if in the opinion of the Commanding Officer there are exceptional reasons that make the retention of the solider desirable, the case is submitted with valid and explicit reasons through the Chain of Command for a decision. There are no specific exceptional reasons laid down: Commanding Officers make their recommendations solely on the circumstances of each individual case.

Asymmetric Warfare

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how the United Kingdom will help to prepare NATO forces for asymmetric warfare; and if he will make a statement. [117847]

Mr. Spellar: NATO's updated Strategic Concept, launched at the Washington Summit in April 1999, recognises, at paragraph 24, that

> Alliance security interests can be affected by other risks of a wider nature, including acts of terrorism, sabotage and organised crime, and by the disruption of the flow of vital resources.

NATO's defence planning processes are designed to adapt Alliance forces to address these changing risks. In addition, much of the follow-on work from last year's Summit, including the Defence Capabilities Initiative (DCI), NATO's Force Structure Review (FSR), and the Weapons of Mass Destruction Initiative (WMDI), will help provide the capabilities that national forces assigned to NATO require if the Alliance is to meet a wide range of threats. The UK is making an important contribution to each of these initiatives.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117815]

Mr. Spellar: On 31 March 1995, the Ministry of Defence employed 99 Service lawyers and had 15 lawyers on loan from the Treasury Solicitor's Department. Two of the latter were employed abroad. On 31 March 2000, the corresponding numbers were 159 Service lawyers and 23 Treasury Solicitor's Department lawyers on loan, with three of the latter employed abroad. Throughout this period, my Department also used the services of other branches of the Treasury Solicitor's Department, the Crown Solicitor in Northern Ireland, the Department's solicitors in Scotland, and lawyers from private firms when their expertise could not be obtained elsewhere.

Ottawa Convention

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the use of *(a)* airfield runway denial weapons incorporating anti-personnel devices and *(b)* anti-tank land mines incorporating anti-personnel devices, with special reference to the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel mines. [118759]

Mr. Hoon: In accordance with our obligations under the Ottawa Convention and the Landmines Act 1998, the Government's policy is not to use any weapon incorporating anti-personnel mines as defined in the Ottawa Convention. This obligation extends to airfield runway denial weapons and anti-tank land mines, and the UK does not retain stocks of any such weapons which contravene the Ottawa Convention.

HEALTH

Social Services (Lancashire)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what dates during the next 12 months the Social Services Inspectorate, Northern Region, expects to receive reports from Lancashire County Council about progress on the implementation of its Action Plan to improve the operations of its social services. [118918]

Ms Stuart: It is expected that reports will be received at least quarterly and discussions are taking place between Social Services Inspectorate and Northern Social Care Region and Lancashire Social Services about precise dates. I anticipate the first report will be received early in June.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the action plan he has received from Lancashire County Council about its proposals to respond to the findings of the Social Services Inspectorate's report on its running of the county's social services. [118919]

Ms Stuart: It is not for the Department to publish the action plan. It is the responsibility of Lancashire County Council and the right hon. Member may wish to make his request to the Director of Social Services.

NHS Specialised Services

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which *(a)* medical and *(b)* other organisations have been consulted about the commissioning of specialised services in the NHS. [119115]

Ms Stuart: Widespread consultation took place prior to the introduction of the new commissioning arrangements for specialised services in April 1999, with views being sought from the medical bodies, the Patients Forum, community health councils, voluntary sector organisations and local authorities. Subsequently consultation takes place through the Regional Specialised Commissioning Groups.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received about the funding of specialised services in the NHS. [119114]

Ms Stuart: With regard to representations received on the subject of funding of specialised services, in the last three months my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has dealt with 21 letters, of which 18 letters were from Members of Parliament, and has met representatives from the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust.

Primary Health Care Groups (Resources)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the allocation of additional resources to each primary health care group as a result of the recent budget announcements by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. [119197]

Ms Stuart: On 28 March my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced details of extra allocations to health authorities for 2000–01. This additional £660 million has brought health authority average increases to 8.9 per cent. in cash terms (6.2 per cent. in real terms).

Health authorities have been directed to increase the budgets/allocations of their primary care groups/trusts by a pro rata share of the entire sum allocated.

A breakdown of the additional allocation to each primary care group/trust is not yet available centrally.

Cannabis

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the clinical trials are to begin on cannabis in medicinal form; and if he will make a statement. [118533]

Ms Stuart: The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) has approved an application to conduct a clinical trial with a cannabis-based medicine. The timing of the trial is a matter for the applicant. The purpose of the trial that has been approved is to demonstrate safety and efficacy in a limited number of subjects, and to establish the necessary dosage regimen and delivery mechanisms to provide the most effective relief to sufferers of multiple sclerosis and other neurological disorders. Evidence from clinical trials of safety, quality and efficacy of a medicine is part of the information that is assessed by the MCA in coming to a decision about whether a product should be licensed for marketing in the United Kingdom. If a marketing authorisation were to be issued by the MCA, we would seek to modify the current Misuse of Drugs Act controls on the use of cannabis.

TREASURY

Windfall Tax

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the amount of money raised through the Windfall Tax which has been raised from companies in Wales; and how much of the money raised from the Windfall Tax has been spent in Wales. [118057]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The liability of individual companies under the Windfall Tax is a confidential matter between them and the tax authorities.

Information on the allocation of the Windfall Tax receipts between the different programmes, as currently estimated, is set out in Table 4.1 of the Financial Statement and Budget Report, 2000. Many Windfall Tax funded programmes are demand-led, with expenditure allocated by participant and not by country, region or any other geographical area. For this reason it is not possible to provide a reliable and robust estimate of the amount which has been spent in Wales, so to the extent that relevant programmes are demand led it will tend to reflect the proportion of clients participating.

Budget Calculations

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what were *(a)* the September forecast inflation figure and *(b)* the September actual inflation figure in each of the past five years. [118749]

Mr. Timms: The following table sets out the RPI inflation rate in September in each of the previous five years and the forecast of RPI inflation for that month in the previous Budget.

	Forecast	Outturn
1995	3	3.9
1996	2.25	2.1
1997	3.0	3.6
1998	3.2	3.2
1999	1.3	1.1

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Homophobia

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools which have received the document entitled, "Beyond a Phase: A Practical Guide to Challenging Homophobia in Schools", from Avon Health Authority. [117717]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 5 April 2000]:* Under the 1994 Act, this is a matter for individual governing bodies. However, the new sex and relationship guidance on which consultation is taking place makes clear to schools the use of appropriate materials in the classroom. It says:

> Materials used in schools must be in accordance with the PSHE framework and the law. Inappropriate images should not be used nor should explicit material not directly related to explanation. Governors and headteachers should discuss with parents and take on board concerns raised both on materials which are offered to schools and sensitive material to be used in the classroom.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will be issuing guidance to Health authorities on any material they produce for use in schools.

School Attendance (Dartford)

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact the Government's social exclusion policies are having on school attendance in Dartford. [118822]

Jacqui Smith: Our Social Inclusion: Pupil Support grant is providing nearly £500 million over three years to support Local Education Authorities and schools to introduce measures for tackling truancy and school exclusion. For 2000–01, Kent Local Education Authority, which has responsibility for schools in Dartford, will receive just over £3 million out of the grant to support projects.

During 1998–99 attendance levels in Kent Local Education Authority have risen both at primary and secondary school level by 0.4 per cent. and 0.1 per cent. respectively.

Separate figures for schools in Dartford can be obtained only at disproportionate costs.

Ministerial Meetings (Requests)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many requests for meetings with deputations of hon. Members and groups from their constituencies his Department has received in each year since 1997, on issues relating to school admissions policy and organisation; how many have *(a)* he and *(b)* other Ministers in his Department (i) seen and (ii) refused to see; and if he will make a statement. [118925]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not available in the form requested. Each year the Department receives many requests for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and other Ministers to meet delegations of hon. Members about many different issues. No comprehensive record of such requests by subject/category is maintained.

Dance Schools

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to support individual children who wish to attend specialist dance schools where provision is not available locally. [119200]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Music and Ballet Scheme provides over 700 Government-aided places for school-age pupils at three independent specialist ballet schools and four independent specialist music schools in England. The great majority of those places are boarding places to enable exceptionally talented children from any part of the country to benefit from the best possible training on offer alongside a broad and balanced general education. We have recently reviewed the Scheme and intend to continue it with some improvements.

In addition, the Dance and Drama Awards provide for 820 talented students aged over 16 to join high quality vocational dance and drama training courses at nearly 30 specialist schools and colleges each year. Funding is available to support students who have to live away from home.

Standard Spending Assessment

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the cost of raising the SSA per pupil to at least the level of *(a)* the 50 LEA, *(b)* the 60 LEA and *(c)* the 70 LEA from the bottom in the year 2000–01. [119404]

Ms Estelle Morris: The estimated costs would be: *(a)* £282 million; *(b)* £346 million; and *(c)* £437 million.

LEA Reserves

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the amount of surplus reserves held by each LEA. [119194]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows, for each local education authority in England, the level of reserves held at 31 March 1999, the latest information available centrally. Reserves are held for the purposes of the authority as a whole and are not specific to education.

Local education authorities levels of reserves
Budget estimates 1999–2000

£000

	Level of reserves as at 31 March 1999
Barking and Dagenham	41,086
Barnet	33,808
Barnsley	5,789
Bath and North East Somerset	8,316
Bedfordshire	10,307
Bexley	17,717
Birmingham	22,282
Blackburn with Darwen	9,851
Blackpool	7,362
Bolton	11,440
Bournemouth	19,841
Bracknell Forest	10,704
Bradford	15,589
Brent	7,290
Brighton and Hove	15,926
Bristol	19,953
Bromley	58,890
Buckinghamshire	22,533
Bury	8,542
Calderdale	5,310
Cambridgeshire	28,676
Camden	60,154
Cheshire	15,977
City of London	165,560
City of Nottingham	17,343
Cornwall	38,433
Coventry	82,412
Croydon	38,390
Cumbria	18,619
Darlington	3,831
Derby City	7,655
Derbyshire	14,002
Devon	9,433
Doncaster	23,342
Dorset	7,139
Dudley	19,283
Durham	23,639
Ealing	12,864
East Riding of Yorkshire	15,980
East Sussex	12,617
Enfield	17,266
Essex	50,434
Gateshead	6,808
Gloucestershire	26,548
Greenwich	38,764
Hackney	6,315
Halton	8,111
Hammersmith and Fulham	18,387
Hampshire	32,192
Haringey	14,500
Harrow	8,044
Hartlepool	9,601
Havering	10,643
Herefordshire	8,484
Hertfordshire	47,624
Hillingdon	8,384
Hounslow	11,002
Isle of Wight	8,538
Isles of Scilly	2,525
Islington	11,325
Kensington and Chelsea	43,045
Kent	23,394
Kingston upon Hull	15,606
Kingston upon Thames	4,099
Kirklees	14,124
Knowsley	5,862

Local education authorities levels of reserves
Budget estimates 1999–2000

£000

	Level of reserves as at 31 March 1999
Lambeth	5,871
Lancashire	30,198
Leeds	18,002
Leicester City	25,308
Leicestershire	15,451
Lewisham	12,714
Lincolnshire	15,189
Liverpool	28,750
Luton	30,018
Manchester	49,135
Merton	6,807
Middlesbrough	3,064
Milton Keynes	7,670
Newcastle upon Tyne	8,717
Newham	29,030
Norfolk	38,077
North East Lincolnshire	7,099
North Lincolnshire	5,402
North Somerset	8,533
North Tyneside	8,785
North Yorkshire	16,699
Northamptonshire	25,258
Northumberland	18,519
Nottinghamshire	13,132
Oldham	17,240
Oxfordshire	16,673
Peterborough	12,753
Plymouth	8,683
Poole	7,320
Portsmouth	14,829
Reading	5,336
Redbridge	8,522
Redcar and Cleveland	8,391
Richmond upon Thames	8,933
Rochdale	17,558
Rotherham	22,909
Rutland	846
Salford	16,347
Sandwell	5,664
Sefton	8,087
Sheffield	4,062
Shropshire	5,895
Slough	7,712
Solihull	7,748
Somerset	27,828
South Gloucestershire	18,059
South Tyneside	9,140
Southampton	16,119
Southend-on-Sea	23,325
Southwark	54,538
St. Helens	14,712
Staffordshire	35,645
Stockport	18,515
Stockton-on-Tees	9,897
Stoke-on-Trent	6,425
Suffolk	41,509
Sunderland	22,386
Surrey	37,756
Sutton	15,939
Swindon	10,255
Tameside	6,729
Telford and the Wrekin	2,272
The Medway Towns	57,756
Thurrock	19,254
Torbay	7,301
Tower Hamlets	26,643

Local education authorities levels of reserves Budget estimates 1999–2000

£000

	Level of reserves as at 31 March 1999
Trafford	32,995
Wakefield	14,258
Walsall	3,598
Waltham Forest	9,049
Wandsworth	39,339
Warrington	12,968
Warwickshire	21,673
West Berkshire	21,354
West Sussex	30,982
Westminster	52,864
Wigan	22,731
Wiltshire	12,883
Windsor and Maidenhead	16,034
Wirral	16,253
Wokingham	6,625
Wolverhampton	17,481
Worcestershire	13,703
York	13,307

SOCIAL SECURITY

Fraud

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the amounts paid to each local authority in the last financial year under *(a)* the weekly benefit savings scheme and *(b)* other schemes, in reward to local authorities for action on housing benefit fraud. [118391]

Angela Eagle: The last full financial year for which we have returns for the weekly benefit savings scheme and the challenge fund scheme, which ran for three years and encouraged councils to bid for funding for innovative anti-fraud initiatives, is 1998–99. I have placed a copy of these returns in the Library.

Age Allowance

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the value was of the age allowance for pensioners in each year from its introduction in 1971, to the present day in relation to *(a)* the index of retail prices and *(b)* the index of average earnings. [119183]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Value of the age addition if it had been uprated in line with RPI and average earnings index at each uprating

£.p.

	Rate payable if uprated in line with RPI	Average earnings
September 1971	0.25	0.25
October 1972	0.25	0.30
October 1973	0.25	0.35
July 1974	0.30	0.40
April 1975	0.35	0.45
November 1975	0.40	0.50
November 1976	0.45	0.55
November 1977	0.50	0.65
November 1978	0.55	0.70

Value of the age addition if it had been uprated in line with RPI and average earnings index at each uprating

£.p.

	Rate payable if uprated in line with RPI	Average earnings
November 1979	0.65	0.85
November 1980	0.75	1.00
November 1981	0.85	1.10
November 1982	0.90	1.20
November 1983	0.95	1.30
November 1984	1.00	1.35
November 1985	1.05	1.45
July 1986	1.05	1.50
April 1987	1.05	1.60
April 1988	1.10	1.70
April 1989	1.15	1.85
April 1990	1.25	2.05
April 1991	1.40	2.25
April 1992	1.45	2.40
April 1993	1.50	2.50
April 1994	1.55	2.55
April 1995	1.60	2.65
April 1996	1.65	2.70
April 1997	1.70	2.80
April 1998	1.75	2.90
April 1999	1.80	3.05
April 2000	1.80	3.20

Notes:

1. The Retail Prices Index (all items) has been used, as published by the Office for National Statistics.
2. Average Earning Index Whole Economy (Non-Seasonally Adjusted) has been used, as published by the Office for National Statistics.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating date.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many sufferers of fybromyalgia were awarded disability living allowance in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000 to date. [118848]

Angela Eagle: Information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

People awarded Disability Living Allowance whose main disabling condition is back pain

Year	Number
1997[1]	11,900
1998[1]	8,800
1999[2]	6,600

[1] Figures relate to 12 months ending November
[2] Figures relate to 9 months ending August
Source:
Analytical Services Division (5 per cent. data)

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what change his Department has made since May 1997 in the provision it makes for those suffering from asbestos-related diseases. [119004]

Mr. Bayley: No changes have been made to the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit scheme with regard to asbestos-related diseases specifically since May 1997.

In April 1997 considerable changes were made to these provisions following advice and recommendations from the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council set out in their report "Asbestos Related Diseases" (Cm 3467). These changes were beneficial to claimants and introduced wide occupational coverage in respect of mesothelioma and removed the 90 day waiting period that operates for other diseases and accidents within this benefit scheme. Changes were also made with regard to diffuse pleural thickening, ensuring that benefit could be paid if the thickening affected one lung only, where previously both lungs had to be affected.

Since May 1997 the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, whose role is to provide expert independent advice, has continued to carefully monitor developments in this field as it does with regard to all occupational diseases.

Benefits Uprating

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what administrative obstacles exist to basing the annual uprating of benefits on the retail prices index for the previous December. [117590]

Mr. Bayley: Using the RPI for the previous December, which would not be published until mid-January, would seriously disrupt the uprating process. Current arrangement, which base the uprating on September's RPI, published in mid-October, allow for the preparation of the uprating schedule and for the uprating review itself to be completed by the end of November. At the end of November a computer scan is run to identify and uprate pension cases. The scan is required at this time to ensure that order books (which cover 20 weeks) containing foils that pass the uprating date are issued with the correct amounts. Processes for uprating other Social Security benefits are similar.

In-patients

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reasons interrupted spells as a hospital in-patient are linked for the purpose of assessing reductions in the rates of benefit which are payable. [118912]

Mr. Bayley: Rules about the payment of benefits in NHS hospitals have been part of the Social Security system for over 50 years. Where the NHS provides free maintenance and care in hospital, benefits for the same purpose are not paid in full indefinitely.

The rule which links together interrupted spells as a hospital in-patient is based on the premise that people whose stay in hospital follows this pattern will, in general, have some home savings during the period that they are being maintained and cared for free of charge in hospital. They are therefore treated in the same way as people whose stay in hospital is continuous. For periods when the person is at home, full benefit is restored.

Christmas Bonus

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the value was of the £10 Christmas bonus in each year from its introduction in 1972, to the present day in relation to *(a)* the index of retail prices and *(b)* the index of average earnings. [119047]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Value of the Christmas bonus if it had been paid and uprated each year since 1972 in line with RPI and average earnings index at each uprating

£.p.

Year	Rate payable if uprated in line with RPI	Rate payable if uprated in line with average earnings
October 1972	10.00	10.00
October 1973	11.00	11.25
July 1974	12.90	13.00
April 1975	14.60	15.10
November 1975	16.55	17.30
November 1976	19.05	19.45
November 1977	21.55	22.25
November 1978	23.30	24.80
November 1979	27.35	29.65
November 1980	31.55	35.15
November 1981	35.35	39.20
November 1982	37.60	42.50
November 1983	39.00	46.20
November 1984	41.00	48.50
November 1985	43.85	52.70
July 1986	44.35	55.05
April 1987	45.30	58.15
April 1988	47.20	62.70
April 1989	50.00	68.20
April 1990	53.80	74.80
April 1991	59.65	81.90
April 1992	62.10	88.10
April 1993	64.35	92.35
April 1994	65.50	94.65
April 1995	66.95	97.85
April 1996	69.55	100.60
April 1997	71.00	104.85
April 1998	73.55	109.15
April 1999	75.90	114.50
April 2000	76.75	119.65

Sources:

1. The Retail Prices Index (all items) has been used, as published by the Office for National Statistics.

2. Average Earnings Index Whole Economy (Non-Seasonally Adjusted) has been used, as published by the Office for National Statistics.

3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest five pence at each uprating date.

Lone Parents

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many personal advisers work for the personal adviser section of the New Deal for Lone Parents; and what the average case load is in each *(a)* constituency, *(b)* local authority area and *(c)* county. [118610]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Personal advisers are not allocated to specific constituencies, local authorities or counties. Such information as is available is in the table.

Resource allocation for advisers and adviser management and the average caseload of current participants for Scotland, Wales and English regions

Region	*Adviser Managers* [1]	*Advisers* [1]	*Participation* [2]	*Average Caseload* [3]
Scotland	4.15	63.62	6,296	92.90
Wales	2.53	39.23	4,693	112.38
Northern	2.35	36.52	3,592	92.41
North West	6.5	98.84	9,168	87.03
Yorkshire and Humberside	3.97	60.91	6,497	100.14
East Midlands	3.97	60.91	6,148	94.76
West Midlands	4.15	63.62	6,894	101.73
South West	2.89	44.65	5,738	120.70
London and the South East	15.06	228.45	21,469	88.16
Total	45.57	696.75	70,495	94.97

[1] The numbers given relate to the number of Staff Unit Years.
[2] Participation relates to the number of lone parents on NDLP in January 2000.
[3] Average number of participants per member of NDLP staff rounded to two decimal places.

Deaf People

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in how many cases children or young people who are moderately or profoundly deaf have been refused Disability Living Allowance and later granted the benefit on appeal to the Independent Tribunal Service in each of the last five years; and what percentage of the total such decisions represent. [118564]

Angela Eagle: Information about the disabilities of people who make unsuccessful claims for Disability Living Allowance is not available. Some information on children and young people with deafness who are awarded benefit on appeal is obtained from sampling, but the numbers are too small to provide reliable estimates.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 30 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 269W, what is the reason for the difference between the cited average saving of £13,000 per year per local authority from the non-redirection of benefit post, and the figures given by his Department in the supplementary memorandum submitted to the Committee of Public Accounts, Session 1998–99, HC643-i, Appendix 2. [118322]

Angela Eagle: The figures quoted in the supplementary memorandum to the Committee for Public Accounts was based on a pilot of the Royal Mail "do not redirect" scheme which was carried out over a four week period in 1997 in two local authorities. Benefit savings directly attributable to "do not redirect" for around £200,000 were recorded during the pilot. However, our latest estimate which is based on a telephone survey of a much larger sample of local authorities and involving a number of assumptions is that the average local authority will achieve savings of around £13,000 per year by operating this initiative.

The difference in savings can be attributed to a number of factors including:

publicity about the scheme having a deterrent effect on potential fraudsters;

the introduction of a number of other anti-fraud initiatives between the pilot and full introduction of the scheme in February 1999 identifying, preventing and deterring fraud which would otherwise have been identified by "do not redirect"; and

the possibility that the pilot which was carried out over a short period of time and involved only two local authorities may have identified an unrepresentative number of fraudulent cases which has not been reflected in live running by a much larger group of authorities.

We would expect the number of fraudulent cases identified and therefore the amount of savings achieved as a direct result of this initiative to continue to reduce as publicity increases and its deterrent effect becomes stronger.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the local authorities that are not using the Royal Mail 'do not redirect' service to counter housing benefit fraud. [118392]

Angela Eagle: The Royal Mail have advised that as at 3 April, the 272 local authorities listed had implemented in full the Royal Mail 'do not redirect' service. Of the remaining 137 authorities, a number are preparing to implement the service and some are operating their own local arrangements. It would be inaccurate therefore to describe such authorities as not operation 'do not redirect'.

Aberdeen
Aberdeenshire
Adur
Allerdale
Alnwick
Amber Valley
Angus
Ashfield
Ashford
Aylesbury Vale
Babergh
Barnet
Barnsley
Basildon
Basingstoke and Deane
Bassetlaw
Bath and North East Somerset

Berwick Upon Tweed
Bexley
Birmingham
Blaby
Blackburn with Darwen
Blackpool
Blyth Valley
Bolton
Boston
Bournemouth
Bracknell Forest
Bradford
Braintree
Brent
Brentwood
Bridgend
Bridgnorth
Brighton and Hove
Bristol
Bromsgrove
Broxtowe
Caerphilly
Calderdale
Cambridge
Camden
Cannock Chase
Canterbury
Cardiff
Carmarthenshire
Castle Morpeth
Cheltenham
Cherwell
Chester
Chesterfield
Chichester
Chiltern
Chorley
Christchurch
City of London
Clackmannanshire
Western Isles
Congleton
Conwy
Corby
Cotswold
Craven
Crawley
Crewe and Nantwich
Croydon
Dacorum
Daventry
Denbighshire
Derby
Derbyshire Dales
Doncaster
Dover
Dundee
Durham
East Cambridgeshire
East Hampshire
East Lindsey
East Lothian
East Northamptonshire
East Renfrewshire
East Riding of Yorkshire
Eastbourne
Edinburgh
Epping Forest
Fareham
Fenland
Fife
Forest Heath
Forest of Dean
Fylde
Gedling
Glasgow
Gloucester
Gosport
Greenwich
Guildford
Hackney
Halton
Hambleton
Hammersmith and Fulham
Haringey
Harlow
Harrogate
Harrow
Hart
Hartlepool
Hastings
Havant
Herefordshire
Hertsmere
High Peak
Hillingdon
Horsham
Hounslow
Ipswich
Islington
Kennet
Kerrier
Kingston upon Hull
Kirklees
Lancaster
Lewes
Lewisham
Lichfield
Lincoln
Liverpool
Luton
Macclesfield
Maldon
Manchester
Melton
Mendip
Merton
Mid Bedfordshire

Mid Suffolk
Mid Sussex
Middlesbrough
Midlothian
Monmouth
Neath Port Talbot
New Forest
Newark and Sherwood
Newcastle Under Lyme
Newcastle Upon Tyne
Newham
North Ayrshire
North Cornwall
North Devon
North Dorset
North East Derbyshire
North Kesteven
North Lanarkshire
North Lincolnshire
North Wiltshire
Northampton
Nuneaton and Bedworth
Oldham
Orkney Islands
Oswestry
Oxford
Pembrokeshire
Poole
Portsmouth
Preston
Purbeck
Reading
Redcar and Cleveland
Redditch
Reigate and Banstead
Renfrewshire
Restormel
Rhondda Cynon Taff
Ribble Valley
Richmond Upon Thames
Richmondshire
Rochdale
Rochford
Rossendale
Rother
Rotherham
Runnymede
Rushcliffe
Rushmoor
Rutland
Ryedale
Salisbury
Scarborough
Scottish Borders
Sedgefield
Sedgemoor
Selby
Sevenoaks
Shepway
Shetland Islands
Shrewsbury and Atcham
Slough
Solihull
South Buckinghamshire
South Cambridgeshire
South Hams
South Holland
South Lanarkshire
South Norfolk
South Oxfordshire
South Ribble
South Somerset
South Staffs
South Tyneside
Southampton
Southend on Sea
Spelthorne
St. Albans
St. Helens
Stafford
Staffordshire
Stevenage
Stirling
Stockport
Stoke on Trent
Stratford Upon Avon
Stroud
Sunderland
Surrey Heath
Swansea
Tameside
Tamworth
Tandridge
Taunton Deane
Teesdale
Telford and Wrekin
Tendring
Test Valley
Tewkesbury
Thanet
Three Rivers
Thurrock
Tonbridge and Malling
Torbay
Torridge
Trafford
Tynedale
Uttlesford
Vale of Glamorgan
Vale of the White Horse
Vale Royal
Wakefield
Waltham Forest
Warrington
Warwick
Waveney
Waverley
Wealden
Wear Valley
Welwyn Hatfield

West Berkshire
West Lancashire
West Lothian
West Oxfordshire
West Wiltshire
Wigan
Winchester
Windsor and Maidenhead
Wirral
Woking
Wokingham
Worthing
Wrexham
Wychavon
Wyre
Wyre Forest
York.

Disabled People

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much each of the innovation schemes established as part of the New Deal for the Disabled *(a)* has cost to date, *(b)* is currently costing on a monthly basis and *(c)* is expected to cost in each of the next 12 months. [118606]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

We are unable to provide information on a monthly basis for each scheme, as this information is commercially confidential. However, the overall amount spent up to February is £2,825,058.17.

Scheme	*Contract start and end date*	*Contract price (£)*
Centrica	1 December 1998 to 30 September 1999	142,000
Disability Matters	1 February 1999 to 31 January 2000	559,066
Status Employment	1 January 1999 to 31 December 1999	132,306
WECIL	1 December 1998 to 31 January 2000	190,970
Manchester TEC	1 November 1998 to 31 March 2000	192,905
Thurso	1 September 1998 to 31 March 2000	30,500
Grimsby	1 December 1998 to 31 March 2000	112,000
RNIB	1 December 1998 to 31 March 2000	308,351
Leonard Cheshire	1 August 1998 to 30 June 2000	256,900
Libra Health	1 October 1998 to 31 May 2000	306,270
Edinburgh University	1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000	145,980
Shaw Trust	1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000	239,406
Scout Enterprises	19 July 1999 to 18 July 2000	182,370
Dundee City Council	1 August 1999 to 31 July 2000	119,500
NSF	1 August 1999 to 31 July 2000	169,374
RNID	1 September 1999 to 31 August 2000	212,070
Rehab UK	1 September 1999 to 31 August 2000	299,900
Mental Health Matters	1 September 1999 to 31 August 2000	212,633
Mencap	1 September 1999 to 31 August 2000	204,919
St. Loye's	1 September 1999 to 31 August 2000	231,930
Bradford	1 September 1999 to 31 August 2000	164,000
Wigan and Leigh	1 September 1999 to 31 August 2000	132,749
Prince's Trust	1 December 1999 to 31 January 2000	162,661
Solotec	1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000	144,000

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many innovative schemes established as part of the New Deal for the Disabled there are in *(a)* each constituency, *(b)* each local authority and *(c)* each county. [118598]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows; 24 innovative schemes are part of the New Deal for Disabled People, covering the following areas:

Scheme	*Area*
Thurso	North Scotland (Highland)
WECIL	Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, South Gloucestershire, North Somerset Leonard Cheshire Foundation-National
Centrica	North West England
Status Employment	Croydon/South London
Disability Matters	Hampshire
Manchester TEC	Manchester
Libra Health	East and West Midlands
Grimsby College	Grimsby and North East Lincolnshire
RNIB	Avon/Wiltshire, West Midlands and Wales
Edinburgh University	Lothians and Fife (within daily travelling distance)
Support Shop Ltd.	Thames Valley
R.N.I.D.	Bristol, Derby, Doncaster, Cardiff, North Wales, Glasgow, Manchester and London
Rehab U.K.	London, Birmingham and Glasgow
Mencap	Gateshead, Leeds and Scotland
Dundee City Council	Dundee, Perth and Arbroath

Scheme	Area
Mental Health Matters	Tyne and Wear, Durham and Cleveland
St. Loyes	South West England
Bradford Council	Bradford Metropolitan District
NSF	Lewisham, Margate, Harrow, Brentwood, Basildon, Romford
Prince's Trust	Hampshire, Surrey and Isle of Wight
Wigan and Leigh	Wigan
Shaw Trust	South Wales
S.O.L.O.T.E.C.	Bexley, Bromley, Greenwich, Lewisham and Croydon

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to increase the number of innovative schemes run as part of the New Deal for the Disabled. [118597]

Angela Eagle: Since July 1997, we have announced funding for 24 Innovative Schemes.

Over the coming months we will develop proposals, in partnership with the Department of Education and Employment, for extending the New Deal for Disabled People. We intend to consult widely as we do so and to announce plans in the summer.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when he intends to up-rate the capital limits for the disabled; [118612]

(2) for how many years the capital limits of pensioners and the disabled have been the same; and when they were last different; [118614]

(3) what are the current capital limits for *(a)* pensioners, *(b)* the disabled and *(c)* other persons claiming social security payments. [118613]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Capital limits for Social Security benefits

£

Benefit	Lower capital limit	Upper capital limit
Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit	3,000	16,000
Council Tax Benefit (RC/NH[1])	10,000	16,000
Income Support (for all groups including pensioners and disabled people)	3,000	8,000
Income Support (RC/NH) (for all groups including pensioners and disabled people)	10,000	16,000
Jobseekers Allowance	3,000	8,000
Jobseekers Allowance (RC/NH)	10,000	16,000

[1] RC/NH—In residential care or nursing home.

Notes:

1. The current capital rules for the income related benefits were introduced in 1988. The lower and upper limits have applied to the same client groups since introduction, apart from an increase in limits in respect of people living in Residential Care and Nursing Homes which was introduced in April 1996.
2. The capital limits are kept under regular review but are not increased annually. There are no immediate plans to increase capital limits for disabled people.

State Pension

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reason the April state pension increase is determined by reference to the preceding September's RPI; and if he will list the RPI rates for *(a)* September and *(b)* April in each year since September 1994. [118768]

Mr. Rooker: September's RPI has been used as a base for uprating since April 1987. Using the September index, which is published in the middle of October, allows time for the preparation of the uprating schedule and the review process before operational implementation begins at the end of November with a computer sweep of the Retirement Pension caseload. The operational timetable is designed so that those renewal order books which cover pre and post April periods can be issued with the correct rates of benefit. Order books, which generally cover a period of 20 weeks, start to be issued with the new rates of benefit in mid-December.

The published RPI for September and April since September 1994

Year	Percentage
September	
1994	2.2
1995	3.9
1996	2.1
1997	3.6
1998	3.2
April	
1995	3.3
1996	2.4
1997	2.4
1998	4.0
1999	1.6

Note:

The RPI for September 1999 was 1.1 per cent.

Source:

Abstract of Statistics for Social Security Benefits and Contributions and Indices of Prices and Earnings

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 17 April 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Local Authority Newspapers

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what monitoring his Department undertakes of the content of local authority newspapers; and if he will make a statement. [118782]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department does not monitor the content of local authority newspapers.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy that newspapers published by local authorities should be subject to the complaints procedure of the Press Complaints Commission; and if he will make a statement. [118781]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Press Complaints Commission is part of a self-regulatory regime for the newspaper industry. All local authority publicity, including newspapers published by local authorities, is subject to the statutory regulatory regime provided by the Local Government Act 1986 and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity issued by the Secretary of State thereunder.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy not to grant permission for the siting of telecommunication masts in residential areas until the Independent Expert Group on mobile phones has reported; and if he will make a statement. [119185]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, set up at the instigation of the Government and chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, is currently considering the possible health effects of the use of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters and is conducting a comprehensive assessment of existing research. The Group is expected to finalise its report shortly. The Government will consider the Group's recommendations and issue a response.

Planning (Flood Alleviation)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue planning policy guidelines to planning authorities indicating how they should handle planning applications for development in areas known to be at risk of flooding but in which the necessary flood alleviation works have not been undertaken. [119474]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning announced on 13 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 249–50W, the publication of a consultation draft of a new Planning Policy Guidance Note 25, "Development and flood risk". This sets out all the considerations to which planning authorities should have regard when handling applications for development in flood risk areas. Copies are available in the Library.

We will consider the responses to this consultation with a view to issuing the new PPG in its final form later this year.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers planning authorities have to *(a)* defer and *(b)* reject planning applications for development in areas known to be at risk of flooding pending the completion of flood alleviation works. [119473]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Local planning authorities have powers under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to impose conditions on a grant of planning permission requiring the carrying out of necessary flood alleviation works as part of a development where such works would form part of the development. Where the necessary flood alleviation works would be required elsewhere than the development site, local planning authorities may impose a condition requiring that the development should not proceed until those works have been carried out, whether by the developer or by any other body. In addition, a developer and local planning authority may enter into an agreement under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to ensure that the necessary works are carried out as part of the development.

Flooding issues are important considerations in the determination of applications for development in areas known to be at risk of flooding. Local planning authorities have powers under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to refuse applications where that risk outweighs other material considerations in the absence of flood alleviation works. Where such works are planned, local planning authorities may refuse an application for development on the grounds of prematurity pending the completion of such works.

Second Homes (Council Tax)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by what mechanism and to what value his Department compensates for loss of council tax income to local authorities resulting from the 50 per cent. discount on second homes. [119181]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 469W.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide on-line and (ii) expect to be deliverable on-line by 2002. [119443]

Ms Beverley Hughes: So that the Cabinet Office can publish the spring 2000 report monitoring progress towards delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005 we are currently collecting data which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. I do not want to pre-empt that report but I can say that we currently provide a range of services electronically that include:

Service	*Currently on-line*	*On-line by 2002*
(a) DETR(C)		
Local Government Grant Settlement	Yes	—
Dissemination of Hourly Air Pollution	Yes	—
Port Traffic Statistics Collection	Yes	—
Supply of International Haulage Permits	—	Yes
Electronic Procurement Programme	—	Yes
Applications to Import/Export Wildlife	—	Yes
Bird Registration	—	Yes
Touring Caravan Exemption Certificates	—	Yes
HGV/PSV Operator Licensing	—	Yes
Local Bus Registration	—	Yes
(b) Executive Agencies		
Highways Agency—Consultation	Yes	—
Highways Agency—Information Line	Yes	—
Highways Agency—Website	Yes	—
DVLA: Registration of a First Vehicle	Yes	—
DVLA: Duplicate Driver Licences	Yes	—
DVLA: Exchange of Driver Licences	—	Yes
DVLA: Duplication Vehicle Registration Documents	—	Yes
DVLA: Re-Licensing Vehicles Subject to Vehicle Test	—	Yes
VI: Submission of Vehicle Model Details	—	Yes
VI: Issue of HGV/PSV Certificates	—	Yes
HSE: Health and Safety Notifications	—	Yes
MCA: Ship Registration	—	Yes

Regeneration Programmes

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans his Department has for merging the New Deal for Communities into the Government's regeneration scheme; [119027]

(2) what plans he has to fund the Single Regeneration Budget beyond Round 7. [119029]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* The level of funding for regeneration programmes beyond March 2002 and the respective future role for each programme, including the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities, is being considered in the current Spending Review. The outcome of the Review and the Government's new expenditure plans for the period to March 2004 should be announced in July.

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money from the Single Regeneration Budget 5 Programme, "Gateways to Community Success", *(a)* has been and *(b)* is due to be, provided to fund skills development and training in the Dartford area. [118843]

Ms Beverley Hughes: "Gateways to Community Success" was approved last year under the Single Regeneration Budget 5 Programme. The scheme aims to develop the capacity of organisations to equip local residents with personal and vocational skills relevant to the needs of the local labour market. Total SRB funding of £4.3 million will be made available to the scheme over a seven year period from 1999 to 2006. In the first year, £200,000 (mainly for set-up costs) was provided by the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA), which is now responsible for Government SRB fundings.

Most of the specific projects supported under this scheme will benefit residents across the whole of the Thames Gateway area in North Kent. It is difficult therefore to break down how much funding will be targeted specifically at Dartford. However, one project under this scheme (Making Connections) is aimed at residents in and around the Temple Hill area of Dartford. Within the overall scheme, this specific project will receive total SRB funding of £809,000. In the first year, £30,000 (again mainly for set-up costs) was provided by SEEDA.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors determine the budget allocation formula for regional development agencies. [119028]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* The allocation methods vary for the RDAs eight main programmes and for their administration. Many factors are taken into account. These include: levels of deprivation; existing legal commitments; opportunities; value for money; Structural Fund responsibilities; regional population totals; and likely receipt income. There are also some allocations for common costs and account is taken of the RDAs' corporate plans and of other relevant information supplied.

Local Government Bill

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the opinion on which he based his decision that he was unable to make a statement, under the provisions of section 19 of the Human Rights Act 1998, that the provisions of the Local Government Bill [Lords] are human rights compliant. [119160]

Ms Armstrong *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* The Government do not normally publish their legal advice. However, I can clarify that there are doubts as to whether section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986 is compatible with Article 10 (freedom of expression) of the

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and with Article 14 (freedom from discrimination) when read with Article 8 (respect for private and family life) and Article 10.

The Bill on introduction to the Lords was, in our opinion, compatible with the ECHR. However, clause 91 of the Local Government Bill amends, and thereby reaffirms, the provisions of section 2A. By extension, this amendment casts doubt on whether the Bill is now compatible with the ECHR. On this basis, the Secretary of State made a statement under section 19(1)(b) of the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Government have already said that they intend to remove clause 91 of the Bill and, in its place, provide for the repeal of section 2A of the 1986 Act. In our view, the Bill will then be compatible with the ECHR.

Rail Franchises

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when a rail franchise passes to the successful company in the event of an existing train operating company failing to secure the renewal of its franchise; and what extra monitoring of service standards will be put in place during the transitional period. [119483]

Mr. Hill: The shadow Strategic Rail Authority will agree a date with interested parties. Normal monitoring standards that are contained within the terms of the franchise agreements will apply.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department spent directly or indirectly on asylum seekers in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998 and *(e)* 1999; and what estimate has been made of expenditure in the year 2000. [119484]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Home Office will be responding to this Question on behalf of Government as a whole, using information that we have provided to them.

Cycling (Mileage Rate)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide funding for local councils to pay a mileage rate on cycle use by their employees. [119337]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government do not provide funding specifically for this purpose. It is for individual local authorities to decide whether to pay cycling mileage allowances to their employees, and to meet the cost from their general budgets. We would certainly encourage all councils and other employers to promote the use of cycles; mileage allowances are one way of doing this. The Government have already increased the taxable allowance on business travel by bicycle to 12p per mile.

If cycles are used on official journeys by employees instead of their cars, councils stand to make a considerable saving on mileage payments.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his Department's energy efficiency performance target, expressed as a percentage change in comparison with 1990–91, for each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [118991]

Janet Anderson: The Department's target is to reduce energy consumption by 8 per cent. from a base year of 1994–95 to 1999–2000 and 1 per cent. per annum thereafter. This later base year reflects the fact that the Department was not created until 1993.

My Department is investigating further measures to reduce energy but opportunities are limited as we already occupy energy efficient buildings which are air conditioned and have intensive IT usage.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what has been the percentage change compared with 1990–91 in his Department's energy efficiency in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [118990]

Janet Anderson: The percentage change compared with the base year of 1994–95 is as follows:

Year	*Percentage change*
1995–96	0
1996–97	3
1997–98	7
1998–99	–7

These are provisional data as recording errors mean that the consumption figures have been recalculated back to the base year. The latest data have still to be confirmed by DETR.

My Department is investigating further measures to reduce energy but opportunities are limited as we already occupy energy efficient buildings which are air conditioned and have intensive IT usage.

Museums (North-west)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funds museums in the north-west of England will receive from the amounts which his Department has allocated to cut museum entry fees; and which museums will receive the money. [119101]

Mr. Alan Howarth: In 1999–2000 to enable free admission for children at the two museums funded by my Department in the north-west which are affected, the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (NMGM) received £719,000 and the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester (MSIM) £188,000. In 2000–01, to enable free admission for children and people over 60, NMGM has been allocated £188,000. The allocation of funds to cut museum entry fees at the museums and galleries funded by my Department in 2001–02 is still under consideration and no detailed figures are available yet. An announcement will be made in due course.

SIMA TV

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what monitoring the Independent Television Commission carries out of programmes on SIMA TV; if SIMA TV broadcasts the statements of Mojahedin Khalq Organisation of Iran and the National Council of Resistances of Iran; when SIMA TV was last fined by the ITC; and if he will make a statement about the future licensing of SIMA TV. [118942]

Janet Anderson: Monitoring is regularly undertaken by the ITC on the broadcasts of all its licence holders. For broadcasters, like SIMA, who have breached the ITC's Programme Codes, this monitoring would be more intense.

Broadcasting statements by groups such as Mojahedin Khalq Organisation or the National Council of Resistances of Iran are not in themselves a problem, provided they carry no incitement to crime, and that they form part of a wider range of views. SIMA was fined £20,000 in November 1999 for not adhering to these points. SIMA may retain its licence as long as it complies with the ITC's Programmes and other Codes.

Turf Football Pitches

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take action to ensure that there is public access to artificial turf pitches for football in each parliamentary constituency; and if he will make a statement. [118956]

Kate Hoey: There are 577 sites in England providing full size, synthetic turf pitches for community or club use. A further 12 sites have, in principle, been awarded funding from the Lottery Sports Fund. Sport England will shortly be carrying out a detailed analysis of the provision of synthetic turf pitches. Any gaps in existing provision will be assessed on the basis of the size of the population served, rather than by parliamentary constituency. The adequacy of the provision of pitches in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is assessed in the same way.

Canoeing

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to *(a)* encourage increased public participation in canoeing and *(b)* assist Britain's elite canoeists to prepare for the Olympic Games. [118957]

Kate Hoey: The Sports Councils, through which public funding for sport is channelled, are providing a total of £5.5 million to encourage participation in canoeing and to assist elite canoeists. Sport England has made 31 awards worth £4,071,474 from the Lottery Sports Fund to canoeing projects. It is also providing £220,000 in 2000–01 towards the English development programme of the British Canoe Union (BCU). This will help fund: a network of development officers whose key objective is to generate greater youth participation in the sport; the development of a network of Access Officers whose role will be to open up additional waterways for canoeing; and the delivery of the BCU's equity programme for England which targets the recruitment of more disabled and women participants into the sport. For the period April 2000—March 2001 the BCU will receive from UK Sport World Class Performance Programme Lottery funding of £1,221,471, which includes support for British Canoeists preparing fro the Olympic Games.

I will be meeting my hon. Friend the Minister for Water and Coastal Policy soon to discuss how to improve provision for water-based recreation, including canoeing. In addition, my officials will be discussing these issues with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Countryside Agency, the Environment Agency and British Waterways.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 155W, on the UK Sports Institute, when he will make a decision on the venue for the London Institute of Sport Network Centre. [119041]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* It is hoped that the decision will be taken by the end of June.

European Athletics Championships

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his policy towards the proposed bid by Gateshead to stage the 2006 European Athletics Championships. [119043]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* The responsibility for preparing and lodging a bid for a major event rests with the appropriate national governing body, in this case UK Athletics. UK Sport is meeting UK Athletics on 18 May to reassess the athletics major event strategy in light of the International Amateur Athletics Federation's decision to award the UK the 2003 World Indoor Championships and the 2005 World Championships. The Gateshead bid is one of the items to be discussed.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when he plans to submit a new map for regional selective assistance to the European Commission; [118087]

(2) what changes he plans to make to the regional selective assistance map. [118089]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 38–39W.

UK/USA Meetings

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what meetings have been held between United States Government officials and his Department in *(a)* the USA and *(b)* the UK in the last 12 months, indicating the dates and locations of the meetings and the subjects discussed. [118625]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* There have been a large number of meetings between United States Government officials and officials of the Department of Trade and Industry over the last 12 months.

These meetings have been at many levels and have covered a great range of subjects including multilateral and bilateral trade issues.

Competitiveness Development Fund

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the DTI's provision of Competitiveness Development Fund resources to the North-west. [119026]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* For the financial year 2000–01 the DTI is making available £440,000 of funding under the Competitiveness Development Fund (CDF) to the North West Development Agency. This represents an increase in funding of over 75 per cent. compared to the previous financial year.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 27 March 2000 details of further measures to encourage innovation and enterprise by businesses, including a new £50 million fund for promoting the development of clusters and business incubation in the English regions. The £50 million will go to the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in England over this and next financial year (2000–01 and 2001–02). £15 million is to be made available in this financial year split equally between the eight current RDAs and the London Development Agency when it is established. This, together with CDF funds, will provide a combined allocation of over £2 million of funding for each RDA in 2000–01 for work on competitiveness and enterprise.

Motor Industry (State Aid)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the dates of *(a)* explanatory memoranda presented to Parliament by the Government and *(b)* agreements in the Council of Ministers concerning the Community Framework for state aid to the motor vehicle industry, OJ No. C279, 1997; and what application has been made within the specification of the Framework to the Commission by Her Majesty's Government in respect of the Longbridge plant. [118922]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Neither an explanatory memorandum or Council agreement exist for the motor vehicles framework. Frameworks are produced by the Commission without reference to the Council, as they (the Commission) have sole competence on the state aid rules and their interpretation.

Conforming to the requirements of the Community Framework for state aid to the motor vehicle industry, HMG formally notified the £152 million Longbridge package to the European Commission 20 August 1999. The clearance process by the Commission was still on-going at the time of BMW's decision to divest itself of elements of the Rover Group (including Longbridge).

New Deal (Job Creation)

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many jobs the New Deal has created; and at what cost. [117328]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

The New Deal is not a job creation programme. The strong economy means that 800,000 people are in work compared with May 1997. 191,600 young people who had faced unemployment of at least six months have been helped by the New Deal move from benefits to work.

Pension and Benefit Payment Methods

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if pensioners in receipt of state pension paid via automated credit transfer will be protected from *(a)* bank charges and *(b)* withdrawal charges if they choose to draw their pensions in cash from a post office from 2003. [119419]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the right hon. Member to the written answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn), and the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 613–14W.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what methods of cash payment benefits he is considering following the introduction of automated credit transfer in post offices and against what criteria they will be evaluated. [119204]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

We have made it clear that people will still be able to collect their cash from post offices if they wish to do so, both before and after the move to ACT in 2003.

We are currently working with the banks and the Post Office on the detailed arrangements. The Post Office already offers banking services on an agency basis for a number of banks. The new Horizon technology currently being installed will give the Post Office the opportunity to offer banking services on an agency basis for a wider range of banks and building societies; and the Post Office have already said that they intend to install 3,000 cash machines.

We are also inviting banks to work with the Post Office to offer a basic banking service to people currently without bank accounts.

However, we recognise that there will be some people who will be unable to pay by ACT. For these, we are considering what alternative simple electronic money transmission system, which could also be accessed at post offices, may be commercially available.

HEALTH

Community Hospital, Sheppey

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much public money has been spent by Thames Gateway NHS Trust on consultants' and lawyers' fees in respect of the PFI contract for the hospital for the Isle of Sheppey. [105196]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* Since 1996–97 the amount spent by Thames Gateway National Health Service Trust on advisers costs for the proposed private finance initiative scheme for a new community hospital for Sheppey are:

£

Expenditure type	Amount
Legal advice	379,000
Financial advice	198,000
Other advice	122,000
Total	699,000

Of these costs, £87,000 were incurred prior to April 1997.

Health Professions Council

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he plans to start consultation on a draft order to establish a health professions council; [118313]

(2) when he expects new professions to be able to register with the health professions council; [118314]

(3) what plans he has to repeal the Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960; and if he will make a statement; [118315]

(4) what plans he has to implement a regulatory framework to enable further professions to obtain state registration; and if he will make a statement. [118312]

Mr. Denham: We are currently considering the proposals for consultation on legislation to replace the Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine. We hope to be able to publish these shortly.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made on introducing a statutory registration scheme for operating department practitioners; and if he will make a statement. [118854]

Ms Stuart: Section 60 of the Health Act 1999 provides power to regulate new health professions. This is one of the subjects for consultation on proposals to create a new Health Professions Council.

Biomedical Scientists (Trainees)

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many trainee biomedical scientists there are in the NHS. [118588]

Mr. Denham: Trainee biomedical scientists are graduates. The length of their vocational training varies depending on the entry route and the ability of the individual. Accurate figures for the number of trainee biomedical scientists employed by the National Health Service are not available as the information is not collected centrally.

Health Authority Budgets

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each health authority in England and Wales, *(a)* its total allocation for 2000–01, including its share of the expenditure announced on 28 March, *(b)* its total allocation if the allocations for 2000–01 had been made on the basis of full weighted capitation and *(c)* the amount by which its total allocation differs from weighted capitation. [118932]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 13 April 2000]:* On 28 March my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced details of extra allocations to health authorities for 2000–01. This additional £660 million has brought health authority average increases to 8.9 per cent. in cash terms (6.2 per cent. in real terms). The information is given in the table.

Information on allocations for Welsh health authorities is available from the National Assembly for Wales.

Health authority	2000–01 allocation including additional £660 million (£000)	2000–01 recurrent weighted capitation target (£000)	Distance from target (£000)	Distance from target (Percentage)
Avon	641,970	649,321	−7,351	−1.13
Barking and Havering	281,533	278,960	2,573	0.92
Barnet	228,234	227,788	447	0.20
Barnsley	171,018	176,397	−5,379	−3.05
Bedfordshire	344,490	358,470	−13,980	−3.90
Berkshire	484,623	500,470	−15,847	−3.17
Bexley and Greenwich	318,047	299,950	18,097	6.03
Birmingham	749,780	745,390	4,390	0.59
Bradford	343,313	347,166	−3,853	−1.11
Brent and Harrow	341,633	334,582	7,051	2.11
Bromley	201,306	201,092	214	0.11
Buckinghamshire	407,599	419,598	−11,999	−2.86
Bury and Rochdale	275,877	276,925	−1,049	−0.38
Calderdale and Kirklees	402,907	403,578	−671	−0.17
Cambridgeshire	442,411	453,098	−10,687	−2.36
Camden and Islington	356,225	349,524	6,701	1.92
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	344,828	339,322	5,506	1.62
County Durham	452,736	461,460	−8,724	−1.89
Coventry	221,753	227,926	−6,172	−2.71
Croydon	223,107	225,624	−2,517	−1.12
Doncaster	216,207	216,634	−427	−0.20
Dorset	487,298	478,263	9,035	1.89
Dudley	200,507	203,550	−3,044	−1.50
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	524,548	524,681	−133	−0.03
East and North Hertfordshire	318,662	322,721	−4,059	−1.26
East Kent	431,841	420,809	11,031	2.62
East Lancashire	384,249	387,072	−2,822	−0.73
East London and the City	545,950	566,894	−20,945	−3.69

Health authority	2000–01 allocation including additional £660 million (£000)	2000–01 recurrent weighted capitation target (£000)	Distance from target (£000)	Distance from target (Percentage)
East Riding	394,083	394,242	−159	−0.04
East Surrey	267,914	262,137	5,777	2.20
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	551,376	538,304	13,072	2.43
Enfield and Haringey	356,859	355,395	1,464	0.41
Gateshead and South Tyneside	277,321	280,211	−2,889	−1.03
Gloucestershire	364,311	353,746	10,564	2.99
Herefordshire	108,512	108,830	−319	−0.29
Hillingdon	169,434	170,397	−963	−0.56
Isle of Wight	100,622	94,019	6,603	7.02
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	321,111	348,987	−27,876	−7.99
Kingston and Richmond	237,277	231,483	5,795	2.50
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	636,437	624,184	12,253	1.96
Leeds	515,080	511,966	3,114	0.61
Leicestershire	570,114	586,393	−16,280	−2.78
Lincolnshire	429,691	433,424	−3,733	−0.86
Liverpool	378,330	371,727	6,603	1.78
Manchester	378,849	371,351	7,498	2.02
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	455,914	447,669	8,245	1.84
Morecambe Bay	224,098	216,807	7,291	3.36
Newcastle and North Tyneside	364,236	361,030	3,206	0.89
Norfolk	504,549	504,363	186	0.04
North and East Devon	328,698	324,303	4,395	1.36
North and Mid Hampshire	320,050	318,438	1,612	0.51
North Cheshire	217,660	215,460	2,200	1.02
North Cumbria	217,218	216,784	434	0.20
North Derbyshire	249,371	250,461	−1,090	−0.44
North Essex	555,679	556,115	−436	−0.08
North Nottinghamshire	260,428	266,191	−5,763	−2.16
North Staffordshire	334,233	340,030	−5,796	−1.70
North West Lancashire	352,074	352,020	54	0.02
North Yorkshire	474,576	477,038	−2,462	−0.52
Northamptonshire	356,996	353,917	3,079	0.87
Northumberland	214,665	215,326	−661	−0.31
Nottingham	427,441	437,686	−10,245	−2.34
Oxfordshire	364,378	372,544	−8,166	−2.19
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	364,591	364,531	60	0.02
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	323,694	311,792	11,902	3.82
Rotherham	173,727	175,697	−1,970	−1.12
Salford and Trafford	339,047	333,322	5,725	1.72
Sandwell	223,644	225,704	−2,060	−0.91
Sefton	211,212	205,523	5,688	2.77
Sheffield	398,432	393,746	4,686	1.19
Shropshire	270,975	274,590	−3,616	−1.32
Solihull	133,724	133,228	496	0.37
Somerset	318,840	316,997	1,843	0.58
South and West Devon	419,315	413,317	5,998	1.45
South Cheshire	443,804	439,798	4,007	0.91
South Derbyshire	375,652	381,611	−5,958	−1.56
South Essex	463,389	470,629	−7,240	−1.54
South Humber	216,561	212,381	4,180	1.97
South Lancashire	206,248	201,999	4,249	2.10
South Staffordshire	352,315	352,822	−508	−0.14
Southampton and South West Hamptonshire	359,457	359,279	178	0.05
St. Helens and Knowsley	257,406	259,579	−2,173	−0.84
Stockport	193,464	192,538	926	0.48
Suffolk	434,142	430,192	3,950	0.92
Sunderland	218,745	221,000	−2,255	−1.02
Tees	404,069	408,692	−4,624	−1.13
Wakefield	231,631	230,600	1,031	0.45
Walsall	179,022	181,848	−2,826	−1.55
Warwickshire	320,497	315,320	5,177	1.64
West Hertfordshire	346,924	345,135	1,788	0.52
West Kent	618,824	612,850	5,974	0.97
West Pennine	325,991	331,585	−5,594	−1.69
West Surrey	401,226	391,077	10,150	2.60
West Sussex	513,306	515,915	−2,609	−0.51
Wigan and Bolton	410,052	422,403	−12,351	−2.92
Wiltshire	380,058	372,333	7,725	2.07
Wirral	247,545	240,159	7,386	3.08
Wolverhampton	175,452	178,762	−3,311	−1.85
Worcestershire	329,672	327,690	1,981	0.60

Day Centres

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many local authorities levy a charge for day centres. [119482]

Mr. Hutton: Information on the number of local authorities levying a charge for day centres in England is not collected centrally. However information on the recoupment of fees and charges by each local authority is available at the Department of Health website at www.doh.gov.uk/public/pss—stat.htm.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations his Department has received on the introduction of charges by social services departments for the use of day centres. [119481]

Mr. Hutton: During the six-month period to April 2000 the Department received an average of two representations per month on the introduction of charges by social services departments for the use of day centres.

Glenthorne Youth Treatment Centre

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he has reached a decision on the future of Glenthorne Youth Treatment Centre; and if he will make a statement. [119424]

Mr. Hutton: In my reply to my hon. Friend on 15 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 223W, I announced that I would be consulting on the future of Glenthorne Youth Treatment Centre, including its possible closure.

That consultation has now been completed and I have considered the representations made to me by the staff of the Centre and their representatives, by Members of Parliament; by local authorities; and by others, especially those representing young people accommodated in the Centre. The Centre has made a valuable and important contribution to the treatment and care of some of the most difficult and disturbed young people in the past, and these representations have paid fitting tribute to that contribution.

When the Youth Treatment Centres were first developed over 20 years ago, there were no comparable facilities for accommodating and treating such difficult and disturbed young people. Things have moved on considerably since then. Local councils have developed their own secure accommodation and have become skilled and experienced at dealing with young people requiring secure care, including young people like those accommodated in Glenthorne. In recent years, the Department of Health has undertaken a major expansion of local authority secure accommodation by providing an additional 170 places for young people. Providers in the voluntary and private sectors have also established their worth. In these circumstances, I have concluded that it is no longer appropriate for the Department to run such a child care facility and that we should therefore withdraw from providing such a service.

We have looked carefully at the option of someone taking over the Centre as a going concern, but, unfortunately, no suitable proposals have been put forward, and 18 of the 30 young people who were in the Centre at the time of my announcement in December have been moved by their placing authorities to alternative facilities. The whole question of the financial viability of the Centre is affecting the morale and welfare of both the staff and the children. It is, therefore, time to bring to an end the uncertainty which has inevitably existed over recent months.

However, the welfare of the children currently placed in Glenthorne is of paramount importance and no decision will be taken on when the Centre will finally close until suitable alternative placements have been found for them. The Department will be working closely with the local authorities and the Prison Service to identify the most appropriate places. Once that transition has been achieved, the Centre will close.

The Department will also be working closely with the Department Trade Union Side to identify posts elsewhere in the civil service to which some of the staff of the Centre could be re-deployed. However, given the specialist nature of some of the posts in the Centre, re-deployment may not be possible in all cases. In those instances, redundancy terms will apply.

This has been a difficult time for the staff of the Centre and I am grateful for the professional manner in which they have continued to conduct themselves.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Accumulated Service Medal

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many members of the Royal Irish Regiment whose claims for the Accumulated Service Medal were reviewed because of insufficient evidence were *(a)* successful and *(b)* unsuccessful in claiming the medal. [119345]

Mr. Spellar I have been asked to reply.

A total of 273 such cases have been considered by the Army Medal Board to date. Of these, 226 have been successful, 30 proved to have no entitlement and were rejected, and 17 have been returned to the Regimental Headquarters of the Royal Irish Regiment for further investigation. An additional 624 applications have still to be prepared for Army Medal Board consideration.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farm Aid Package

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the value of the farm aid package announced on 30 March, and if he will publish a breakdown of the components of the farm aid package,

listing for each component *(a)* its value, *(b)* its funding source, *(c)* eligible recipients, *(d)* conditions of eligibility, *(e)* time of availability, *(f)* budgetary year, *(g)* whether it has previously been announced by (i) the Government and (ii) the European Commission and *(h)* if it has been approved by the European Commission and, if not, when he expects such approval to be given. [117970]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The Action Plan for Farming discussed at the Farming Summit on 30 March outlined a programme of measures to help provide a proper, structured plan for the future. The aid measures amounting to over £200 million are listed. Many of the other measures within the Action Plan will also have considerable benefit to the farming industry, though it is not as yet possible to quantify these.

Action plan for farming (13 April 2000)

Measure	*Value (£ million)*	*Funding source*	*Eligible recipients and conditions of eligibility*	*Time of availability*	*Previously announced*	*EC approval*
Introduce a scheme to encourage the restructuring of the pig industry in order to improve its long term viability	'26	UK	To be announced	To be announced	No	An aid notification has been submitted to the EC
Pay to dairy farmers all the agrimonetary aid that EU rules permit this year only	'22	UK (£11 million) and EU'	Aid will be allocated in proportion to milk quota held on 31 March 2000	To be announced	No	An aid notification will be submitted to the EC this month
Pay agrimonetary compensation to beef farmers of £22 million this year only. Payments will be made in connection with Beef Special Premium, Suckler Cow Premium and Extensification Payments for the 2000 scheme year	'22	EU'	Payments will be made in connection with Beef Special Premium, Suckler Cow Premium and Extensification Payments for the 2000 scheme year	The majority will be payable in November, and the remainder in the second quarter of 2001	No	An aid notification will be submitted to the EU this month
Agrimonetary compensation to sheep farmers of £22 million this year in respect of 1999 scheme year claims	'22	EU'	Paid to Sheep Annual Premium claimants in respect of the 1999 scheme year	Payments will be made with the first advances of Sheep Annual Premium in July/August	No	An aid notification will be submitted to the EC this month
Increase support for hill farmers beyond the level specified in the Rural Development Plans submitted to the Commission	'60	UK	The majority of the moneys will be added to the budgets for the LFA compensatory allowances, which will be modified to assist restructuring so as to strengthen the industry and to make it better able to deliver the social and environmental benefits provided by extensive sheep and beef grazing. The remainder will finance a consultancy programme to improve hill farmers' access to business skills	LFA support payments are made in the early months of each year	No	The scheme has been submitted to the EC for approval under the Rural Development Regulation; the changes will need to be discussed with the EC
Seek from the Commission an increase in the maximum weight per animal on which compensation is payable under the Over Thirty Months Scheme	'20	UK	Payable in respect of cattle slaughtered under the Over Thirty Months Scheme	To be determined	No	The Over Thirty Months Scheme for cattle is an EU scheme and thus changes to its rules require the EC to make a proposal to be adopted by the Beef Management Committee on which all member states are represented. A formal request to that effect has been made to the EC

Action plan for farming (13 April 2000)

Measure	*Value (£ million)*	*Funding source*	*Eligible recipients and conditions of eligibility*	*Time of availability*	*Previously announced*	*EC approval*
Remove charges for dairy hygiene inspections in England as soon as the necessary legislation can be put in place	[1]1	UK	All dairy production holdings in England	To remove the charge, the Dairy Products (Hygiene) (Charges) Regulations 1995 will need to be amended, which we estimate will take three months	No	EC approval not needed
Hold the increase in meat inspection charges for 2000–01 to the rate of inflation	[1]4.5	UK	All operators of licensed meat plants in GB	2001–01	Confirmation that the increase in Meat Hygiene charges will be kept to the level of inflation and announcement that this is equivalent to £4.5 million in 2000–01	EC approval not required
Increase the rate of grant under MAFF's Farm Waste Grant Scheme from 25 per cent. of eligible expenditure (under which uptake has been low) to 40 per cent.	[2]3.5	UK	Payable to farmers in Nitrate Vulnerable Zones installing improved manure storage and handling facilities to comply with regulatory measures	As soon as EC approval is obtained	No	Existing scheme is an approved State Aid. Approval is being sought for an increase in rate
The Government will double the Regional Development Agencies' Redundant Building Grant Programme, which operates in Rural Priority Areas, to £8 million in 2000–01	[1]4	UK	Redundant farm building owners	To be announced	No	Existing scheme is an approved State Aid
The Government will allocate £2.3 million to create in England a European Centre for organic fruit and nursery stock	[2]2.3	UK	UK Capital Modernisation Fund	The European Centre will be located at Horticulture Research International in East Malling, Kent	No	EC approval not required
A single charge for authorisation to dispose of used sheep dip, equivalent to the current application charge of £85, should cover the full four-year period of the initial authorisation. This means that the current annual charge of £107 will not be payable during the first four-year period	[2]4.7	UK	Small dischargers including farmers who dip sheep and need to dispose of sheep dip to land	For first authorisation	No	EC approval not required
Business Restructuring in England:						
The Government will pump-prime the drive to improve the competitiveness of farmers by providing funding for business improvement, on a challenge basis, following the model of the Agricultural Development Scheme 1999	[1]1	UK	Industry, organisation and partnerships	Scheme will be launched in the next few weeks	No	Existing scheme is an approved State Aid. Approval will be sought for changes to the scheme
The Government will provide funding of £1.2 million to Lantra (National Training Organisation for the Landbased Sector) to promote the economic benefits of training and to analyse the training needs of 20,000 farm businesses	[1]1.2	UK	Farmers in England	July 2000	No	Existing scheme is an approved State Aid. Approval will be sought for changes to the scheme

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Action plan for farming (13 April 2000)

Measure	*Value (£ million)*	*Funding source*	*Eligible recipients and conditions of eligibility*	*Time of availability*	*Previously announced*	*EC approval*
The Government will help farmers develop better business practices through tailored business advice. As farmers increasingly diversify their businesses, they will be able to draw on the wider expertise and services of the Small Business Service	[1]6.5	UK	Farmers in England	The new service is being planned to start on 1 September 2000	No	Need for EC approval to be confirmed
The Government will continue to support the Rural Stress Information Network by extending for at least a further year the secondment of a MAFF official to that organisation. MAFF will also increase the provision of free advice to those farmers referred to it by certain organisations. The Government will increase its support to voluntary bodies dealing with rural stress on the basis of an action plan it will draw up with them by June	[1]0.5	UK	Farmers in England	Funds for rural stress support groups will be available in the summer	No	Need for EC approval to be confirmed
Launch an electronic portal for farming	[1]0.4	UK	The whole industry will stand to benefit	The first phase is planned to go live by December 2000	No	EC approval not needed
Business restructuring aid for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland	[1]2	UK	Details are to be announced in due course by the devolved Administrations and Northern Ireland	Details are to be announced in due course by the devolved Administrations and Northern Ireland	No	Will depend on measures to be announced
Total	203.5	—	—	—	—	—

Note:
In addition the Government will pay this year agrimonetary aid to arable farmers (£57 million, to be paid from mid-October 2000), sheep farmers (£10 million, being paid now) and beef farmers (£21 million, to be paid from mid-October 2000) which was previously announced by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 22 September 1999.
[1] In 2000–01
[2] In 2001–02
[3] 71 per cent. of the EU funding is borne by the UK because of the application of the Fontainebleau abatement
[4] Estimate in 2000–01
[5] Over 2 years: £0.3 million in 2000–01 and £1.961 in 2001–02
[6] Over 4 years

Organic Food

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of the food consumed in the UK is organically produced; and what estimate he has made of the amount that will be so produced in 2006. [118573]

Mr. Morley: Precise information is not available. We estimate the share of organic food in the overall UK market as in the order of 5 per cent.

We have made no estimate for future years.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the total amount of money paid under the Common Agricultural Policy to organic farmers in the EU; and what percentage this represents of the total CAP spend. [118577]

Ms Quin: The information requested is not available in the format required.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what targets other EU member states have set for organic farming. [118574]

Mr. Morley: The information available is not complete but we understand that Austria, Denmark, Finland, France and Sweden have set targets for the conversion of agricultural land to organic farming. In addition several of the German Bundesländer have set such targets. These targets range from 3 per cent. to 10 per cent. of agricultural land.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much money his Department has spent on research into *(a)* organic farming, *(b)* biotechnology and genetic modification and *(c)* all areas of agriculture, in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [118568]

Ms Quin: MAFF spending in these areas over the last five years is shown in the tables. The figures for 1999–2000 are provisional.

(a) Organic farming

Year	*£ million*
1995–96	0.931
1996–97	1.116
1997–98	0.908
1998–99	1.481
1999–2000	(2.027)

The organic farming sector also benefits from much of the other research the Ministry undertakes: for example, its planned spend of over £8 million in 1999–2000 on biological control techniques, plant health, animal welfare and wildlife conservation on farms.

(b) Biotechnology and genetic modification

Year	*£ million*
1995–96	20.09
1996–97	22.94
1997–98	25.22
1998–99	28.91
1999–2000	(ca. 26)

(c) All areas of agriculture including organic farming, biotechnology and genetic modification

Year	*£ million*
1995–96	88.94
1996–97	87.14
1997–98	89.74
1998–99	90.58
1999–2000	(90.78)

West Dorset

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will classify West Dorset as an area qualifying for hill farming compensation. [118623]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* To qualify for hill livestock compensatory allowances, West Dorset would have to be designated as a Less Favoured Area (LFA).

LFAs in the UK were first designated under Council Directive 75/276/EEC, and last amended by Commission Decision 91/25/EEC. For any additional area to be designated as LFA it would need to meet the general criteria set out in Council Regulation (EC) No. 1257/99 (Articles 17–21) and the specific criteria set out in Council Directive 75/268/EEC (Articles 3 (4) and 5) as adopted by Council Directive 84/169/EEC.

Proposals for any extension of the LFA area in England would need to be submitted to the European Commission for approval as part of the England Rural Development Plan. No such proposals have been included.

Lindane

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the approvals for products containing Lindane which have been suspended, withdrawn or revoked from market authorisation in the last five years, indicating the crops for which use of the products had been approved, including off-label approvals. [118804]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 12 April 2000]:* Those products containing Lindane which have been suspended, withdrawn or revoked from the market since 1 November 1995, and the crops for which they held approval, are:

Product name	*MAFF No.*	*Crops*
Atlas Steward	03062	Apple
		Barley (spring)
		Barley (winter)
		Beetroot
		Blackberry
		Broad bean
		Broccoli (seed crop)
		Brussels sprout (seed crop)
		Cabbage (seed crop)
		Calabrese (seed crop)
		Cauliflower (seed crop)
		Grassland
		Kale (seed crop)
		Lettuce (protected)
		Loganberry
		Maize (spring)
		Maize (winter)
		Mustard (seed crop)
		Oilseed rape
		Ornamental (including bulb and corm)
		Ornamental shrub
		Ornamental tree
		Pea
		Pear
		Raspberry
		Spinach
		Strawberry
		Sugar beet
		Swede (seed crop)
		Tomato (protected)
		Turnip (seed crop)
		Wheat (spring)
		Wheat (winter)
CDA Castaway Plus	04758	Turf
Gamma-Col	00964	Apple
		Blackberry
		Brassica
		Cereal
		Christmas tree
		Chrysanthemum
		Cucumber
		Elm
		Grass
		Loganberry
		Maize
		Oilseed rape
		Ornamental
		Pear
		Plum
		Raspberry
		Strawberry
		Sugar beet
		Vegetable
Gamma-Col Turf	05450	Turf
Gamma-Col Turf	06826	Turf
Gamma-Col Turf	07868	Turf
Gammalex	00965	Oilseed rape (seed)
Gammalex	06396	Oilseed rape

Product name	*MAFF No.*	*Crops*
Gammasan 30	00969	Barley (seed)
		Oat (seed)
		Wheat (seed)
Gammasan 30	06671	Barley (spring)
		Barley (winter)
		Oats (spring)
		Oats (winter)
		Wheat (spring)
		Wheat (winter)
Hydraguard	03278	Brussels sprout
		Cabbage
		Kale
		Oilseed rape
		Swede
		Turnip
Hydraguard	08877	Brussels sprout
		Cabbage
		Kale
		Oilseed rape
		Swede
		Turnip
Hysede FL	02863	Brassica seed (including broccoli, brussels sprout, cabbage, oilseed rape, swede)
		Broccoli
		Brussels sprout
		Cabbage
		Oilseed rape
		Swede
		Turnip
Kotol FS	06968	Barley
		Barley (seed)
		Oats
		Oats (seed)
		Rye (seed)
		Wheat
		Wheat (seed)
Lindane 20	01553	Apple
		Artichoke (Jerusalem, globe)
		Aubergine
		Bean (broad, navy, runner, soya, dwarf, French)
		Beetroot
		Brassica (named)
		Broccoli
		Brussels sprout
		Bulb
		Cabbage
		Chinese cabbage
		Cauliflower
		Collard
		Fennel
		Forestry
		Kale
		Kohlrabi
		Oilseed rape
		Ornamental
		Pea (mange-tout)
		Pear
		Pepper
		Plum
		Pot plant
		Raspberry
		Sugar beet
		Tomato
Lindex-Plus FS Seed Treatment	03934	Chinese cabbage
		Oilseed rape (seed)
Lindex-Plus FS Seed Treatment	08212	Oilseed rape (seed)
Murfume Grainstore Smoke	05575	Food storage practice (fumigation of empty bins, chutes, conveyors, ducts and buildings used for storage of raw grain pulses and oilseeds)
Murfume Lindane Smoke	05576	Glasshouse crop (edible + ornamental)
		Food storage practice (grain store, silo)
		Mushroom
New Kotol	05081	Barley (seed)
		Oats (seed)
		Rye (seed)
		Wheat (seed)
New Kotol	06212	Barley (seed
		Oats (seed)
		Rye (seed)
		Wheat (seed)
Sentry	06209	Sugar beet
Unicrop Leather Jacket Pellets	02272	Barley (spring)
		Barley (winter)
		Grassland
		Oats
		Rye
		Sugar beet
		Triticale
		Wheat (spring)
		Wheat (winter)
Vitavax RS	02310	Oilseed rape (seed)
Vitavax RS	06029	Oilseed rape
		Oilseed rape (seed)
Vitavax RS	08040	Flax
		Linseed
		Oilseed rape
Wireworm FS Seed Treatment	05640	Barley
		Oats
		Wheat
Wireworm Liquid Seed Treatment	05641	Barley
		Oats
		Wheat

Pesticides

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reason, in the 1998 survey of the working party on pesticides residues, aldicarburas was not among the pesticides actively sought in retail samples of speciality potatoes. [118803]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 12 April 2000]:* This was the first time speciality potatoes had been analysed as part of the Government's annual residues monitoring programme. The potatoes were therefore tested against a standard multiple residue screen to give an indication of the residues present. Aldicarb is not part of this general screen. However, processed potato products were also surveyed in 1998, and aldicarb was included in this analytical suite. The results of this survey are due to be published later this year. A special survey on the variability of aldicarb residues in potatoes (including new potatoes) was published in August last year, the results of which are available on the Pesticide Safety Directorate's (PSD's) internet website (http://maffweb/aboutmaf/agency/psd/psdhome.htm), or direct from PSD. The full document is also available to all Members in the Library of the House.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what criteria were used in the 1998 survey of the Working Party on Pesticide Residues to select the countries of origin from which samples of imported speciality potatoes would be tested. [118807]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 12 April 2000]:* The surveys of the Working Party on Pesticide Residues (WPPR) are not, except in certain circumstances, directed towards produce of particular countries. The samples of speciality potatoes purchased as part of the 1998 survey were representative of what was available on the UK market at the time of purchase.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Third World Debt

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what progress has been made with the launch of a joint IMF and World bank fund to focus on alleviating the debts of the heavily indebted poor countries by the end of 2000; [119049]

(2) what progress has been made with proposals to speed up the HIPC II debt cancellation programme. [119336]

Clare Short: So far, five countries have qualified for relief under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. This is disappointing because the target was for 11 countries to have qualified by the Spring Meetings of the World bank and the IMF. The Government remain strongly committed to the G7 target of three-quarters of eligible countries getting to Decision Point by the end of 2000. We are pressing the bank and Fund to speed up the process.

Discussions are also continuing to agree the financing arrangements for the multilateral development banks' participation in the Initiative. Further contributions to the HIPC Trust Fund will be required. UK has made the largest commitment to date—over $350 million. This includes our share of European Community contributions to the Trust Fund.

Primary Education

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 2 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 619W, on primary education, how much each heavily indebted poor country received from the UK's bilateral aid budget for the provision of primary education for each of the last three years. [118350]

Clare Short: The following table indicates UK bilateral development assistance expenditure on primary education in heavily indebted poor countries over the last three financial years for which data are available. These data refer only to projects and programmes aimed solely at primary education. There is also expenditure on this area included in wider projects and programmes, or funded through NGOs, which cannot be separately identified.

£ actuals

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Ethiopia	114,930	10,283	405,152
Ghana	0	42,373	4,833,831
Kenya	1,154,093	2,004,629	2,721,644
Malawi	2,571,480	2,420,122	3,924,906
Mozambique	0	136,018	77,679
Tanzania	46,168	41,382	70,095
Uganda	0	0	[1]1,000,000
Zambia	6,688	10,429	32,505
Total	3,893,359	4,665,236	13,065,812

[1] Initial expenditure against DFID's commitment of £67 million to Uganda's Education Strategic Investment Programme (1998–2003), one of the prime objectives of which is to achieve universal primary education by 2003.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105308]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 19 January 2000]:* A list of those properties which are wholly, or have been mainly, unoccupied that are held by my Department and agencies has been placed in the Library.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many claims under the special payments category of the Jobseeker's Allowance were made in 1999; and how many of these were refused on the grounds of inadequate contribution payments. [108450]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Dr. Brian Mawhinney, dated 17 April 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning special payments relating to Jobseeker's Allowance in 1999. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Employment Service has arrangements to consider claims for compensation from jobseekers who claim to have suffered a financial loss or severe worry and distress, gross inconvenience or embarrassment as a result of errors by our staff, under the terms of a Department of Social Security compensation scheme.

In the period 1 January 1999 to 31 December 1999, we received 391 claims for special payments as a result of alleged error in connection with Employment Service administration of Jobseeker's Allowance. Of these claims for compensation, 16 were in connection with advice concerning the National Insurance Contribution conditions for Jobseeker's Allowance, of which two were refused.

I should add that the Benefits Agency also make special payments as a result of alleged errors with their administration of Jobseeker's Allowance. Therefore, I have asked for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency to reply to you direct on the number of special payments they have made in relation to Jobseeker's Allowance.

I hope this is helpful.

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117814]

Mr. Wills: The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) does not directly employ lawyers but obtains them from Treasury Solicitor's Department (TSD). The lawyers are employed by TSD and allocated to DfEE. The figures given represent the number of lawyers allocated as at 31 March for the years in question.

As at 31 March 2000, 24 lawyers were allocated by TSD to DfEE.

DfEE came into existence following Machinery of Government changes in July 1995. The figures given for 1995 are for the number of lawyers allocated by TSD to its two predecessor Departments: the Employment Department Group (EDG) and Department for Education (DfE).

As at 31 March 1995, 13 lawyers were allocated to the former EDG and 10 to the former DfE, making a total of 23.

Meaningful comparisons between the numbers for 1995 and 2000 will be difficult to establish as DfEE's responsibilities do not precisely equate with those of its predecessor Departments.

For example, the Health and Safety Executive and the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service were both part of EDG in March 1995 but transferred to the Department of Environment and the Department of Trade and Industry respectively as part of the Machinery of Government changes later that year.

Vulnerable Adults

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to introduce police checks on employees in education working with vulnerable adults. [118739]

Ms Hodge: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has announced his intention to implement part V of the Police Act 1997. As a result, criminal records information will become more readily available to employers recruiting people to work with children or vulnerable adults. Details of how this is to work in education are being developed currently and announcements will be made at a later date.

Disabled People

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will make an announcement about the national implementation of the personal adviser service part of his New Deal for the Disabled. [118599]

Ms Hodge: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) on 12 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 186W.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many personal advisers work for the personal adviser section of the New Deal for the Disabled; and what the average care load is in each *(a)* constituency, *(b)* local authority area and *(c)* county. [118609]

Ms Hodge: The information is not available in the precise form requested. Personal advisers are not allocated to specific constituencies, local authorities or counties. The table sets out the coverage and average caseload per personal adviser (as at 25 February) for each pilot area.

Pilot area	*Communities covered*	*Numbers of personal advisers per pilot area*	*Caseload*	*Average caseload per PA per pilot area*
Lanarkshire: Clyde Valley and Coatbridge	Hamilton, Motherwell, Coatbridge and Bellshill	11.6	284	24.5
Eastern Valleys	Aberdare, Blackwood, Caerphilly, Ebbw Vale, Merthyr Tydfil	10.7	408	38.1
Sandwell	Smethwick, West Bromwich	7	224	32
Bolton	Bolton	7.6	285	37.5
Central Sussex	Brighton, Hove	9.3	184	19.8
Bristol East and Bath	Bristol East and Bath	8	262	32.8
Newham	Plaistow, Stratford, Canning Town	9	243	27
South Tyneside	Gateshead, South Shields	12	661	55.1
Mercia East	Boston, King's Lynn, Skegness	8	281	35.1
South Devon	Plymouth, Saltash, Torbay, Tavistock, Totnes, Kingsbridge	10	349	34.9
Bedfordshire	Bedford, Luton	8	117	14.6
North Yorkshire	Harrogate, Scarborough, York, Northallerton	10	343	34.3

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much the personal adviser section of the New Deal for the Disabled has cost in each month since the start of the scheme. [118608]

Ms Hodge: The information requested is shown in the table.

	£000
September 1998	31
October	45
November	80
December	103
January 1999	90

	£000
February	138
March	788
April	32
May	513
June	603
July	567
August	918
September	932
October	626
November	765
December	842
January 2000	921
February	1,008

New Deal (Advertising)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total cost to date of publications on, and advertising of, New Deal programmes for the unemployed. [118512]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* A sum of £1,849,405 has been spent on publications and a sum of £9,697,576 has been spent on advertising New Deal. These figures exclude the cost of VAT but include amounts incurred for New Deal for Young People, New Deal 25 plus, New Deal 50 plus, New Deal for Partners of Unemployed People and New Deal for Disabled People.

The sums do not include expenditure on the promotion of New Deal for Lone Parents, as the Department of Social Security takes the lead on this programme.

Deputations

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many requests for meetings with deputations of hon. Members and groups from their constituencies, his Department has received in each year since 1997, on issues relating to *(a)* further and *(b)* adult education; how many have (i) he and (ii) other Ministers in his Department (1) seen and (2) refused to see; and if he will make a statement. [118924]

Mr. Wicks: This information is not centrally available and could be collected only at a disproportionate cost.

Pre-school Sector

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pre-schools and playgroups in Dartford *(a)* have benefited and *(b)* are expected to benefit from the special Government grants made available to relieve financial pressure on the pre-school sector. [118821]

Ms Hodge: Our records for the 1998 and 1999 schemes to assist pre-schools and playgroups facing financial difficulty show that no applications for grant were received from pre-schools and playgroups in Dartford.

Arrangements for the administration of the new scheme, which I announced on 29 March 2000, will be discussed with the voluntary pre-school and playgroup support organisations. Among the main issues to be taken into account in deciding applications for grant will be the financial position of the group, quality issues, longer term viability and any comments received from the local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.

Ofsted Inspections

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total cost of Ofsted inspections since their inception for *(a)* the county of Cheshire, *(b)* the constituency of Crewe and Nantwich and *(c)* the town of Crewe. [119013]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 13 April 2000]:* This is a matter for Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his Department's energy efficiency performance target, expressed as a percentage change in comparison with 1990–91, for each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [118999]

Mr. Wills: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 548–49W. It was explained then that a new target had been set across the Government estate, to apply from 2000–01, of a one per cent. per annum reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The base year will be 1999–2000 as it was the final year to which the previous target applied. My Department will aim to meet this target. It represents a change against the previous cross-Government Target to 31 March 2000 which was expressed in terms of reductions in energy expenditure. Measurement in greenhouse gas emissions provides a much better fit with the current climate change programme and the UK's Kyoto targets.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the percentage change compared with 1990–91 in his Department's energy efficiency in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [118998]

Mr. Wills: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 580–84W, which reported progress for all central government departments to 31 March 1998. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions expect to publish results for the period up to March 1999 shortly.

School Milk

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health regarding the reintroduction of free milk for school children; and if he will make a statement; [119009]

(2) what recent representations he has received regarding the reintroduction of free milk for school children; [119011]

(3) what assessment he has made of the feasibility of reintroducing free milk for school children. [119012]

Jacqui Smith: The law already requires that those local education authorities and schools that choose to provide milk must make it available, without charge, to pupils whose parents receive Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Secretary of State for Health have not had any recent discussions about extending eligibility for free school milk. In the last six months we have received only three letters from members of the public pressing for the re-introduction of compulsory free school milk for all school children.

The Government have no plans to extend eligibility for free school milk or to make the serving of free milk compulsory. We have not therefore assessed the feasibility of doing so. We have however legislated to allow free drinking milk to be served at any time during the day, rather than only at lunchtime.

Milk is one of many foods that play an important part in a balanced diet. Milk and dairy foods are part of our proposals for minimum nutritional standards for school lunches, which will come into operation next year. We will be recommending in our guidance to school caterers that drinking milk should be made available every day. We also encourage schools to claim existing subsidies for school milk, such as those available through the European Community School Milk Subsidy Scheme.

Early-years Education

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what additional resources were allocated to maintained nursery schools as part of the Chancellor's Budget; in which Government publication reference to these additional resources is to be found; and by what means the information was communicated to maintained nursery school headteachers and governors; [119193]

(2) what additional resources have been allocated to those early years educational providers that form part of local education authorities' Early Years Childcare and Education Development Partnerships to provide early years places for all four year olds, as a result of the recent Budget announcements. [119195]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* I have written to the headteachers of all schools in England who will benefit from the extra £290 million we are making available following the Budget. This includes maintained nursery and primary schools. The money is part of a real terms increase of over 10 per cent. this year. Copies of the letters, including those sent to nursery schools, are being placed in the Library. The final allocations are subject to approval of a special grant report which was laid before Parliament on 6 April and is being debated on 17 April. No additional resources have been allocated directly to Early Years, Childcare and Education Development Partnerships. I have, however, made an additional £0.5 million available for pre-schools' groups and playgroups facing financial difficulties. This follows a similar scheme last year, and will give groups time in which to consider their longer term plans.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what definition of nursery places is used by his Department in providing funding for nursery places for four-year-olds. [119492]

Ms Hodge: A nursery education place consists of five $2\frac{1}{2}$ hour sessions per week over three terms of 11 weeks each.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many Early Excellence centres have been set up in the last three years; and at what cost. [119493]

Ms Hodge: We have designated 29 Early Excellence Centres in the last three years. Specific DfEE funding of £6 million has been made available during that period.

Leeds LEA

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many times his Department's officials have met the team of consultants appointed to evaluate Leeds Local Education Authority; and what future meetings will take place and for what purpose [119249]

Ms Estelle Morris: DfEE officials and Leeds officers met with PricewaterhouseCoopers' Leeds LEA team when interviewing them for the work in Leeds, and meet them at the regular steering group meetings which check on progress. Three such meetings have taken place and two further steering group meetings are planned for May. Individuals from the team will also continue to meet officials from the Department for the range of purposes set out in the answer which I gave to my hon. Friend on 11 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 89–90W.

Maintained Nursery Schools

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the maintained nursery schools that have closed in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [119198]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* The maintained nursery schools that have closed in the academic years 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are listed in the following table. There are no proposals for nursery school closure currently under consideration as far as the Department is aware. All the nursery school closures were linked to the establishment of alternative nursery units at other schools except one where the nursery school was closed as there were surplus nursery places in the area. Since 1997, four new nursery schools have been established.

Nursery school closures for years 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000

LEA name	*School name*
September 1997-August 1998	
Cheshire	Hilary Howarth County Nursery School[1]
Kirklees	Saville Town Nursery School[2]
Leeds	Hunslett Nursery School[2]
North Tyneside	North Shields Nursery School[2]
Northumberland	Ashington Hirst North Nursery[2]
Salford	Dorning Street Nursery School[2]
Salford	High Bank Nursery[2]
Salford	London Street Nursery School[2]
Salford	The Lakes Nursery School[2]
Sandwell	Cradley Heath Nursery School[2]

Nursery school closures for years 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000

LEA name	*School name*
Staffordshire	Dragon Square Nursery School[2]
Stockton on Tees	Billingham Nursery School[2]
Stoke on Trent	Meir Nursery School[2]
Stoke on Trent	Abbey Hulton Nursery School[2]
Sunderland	St. Colomba's Nursery School[2]
September 1998-August 1999	
Durham	Clarence Nursery School[2]
Manchester	Mayfair Nursery School[2]
Manchester	Barnes Green Nursery School[2]
Manchester	Gresty Nursery School[2]
Manchester	Shakespeare Nursery School[2]
Slough	William Penn Nursery School[2]
Southampton	Aldermoor Early Years Centre[2]
South Tyneside	Elizabeth Diamond Nursery[2]
September 1999 onwards	
Derby City	Beechwood Nursery School[2, 3]
Nursery schools established since September 1997	
Croydon	Thornton Heath Early Years Centre
Croydon	Selhurst Day Care Centre
Wolverhampton	Bilston Nursery
Wakefield	Sandal Agbrigg Pre-5 Centre

[1] Nursery school closed as there were surplus places in the nearby nursery unit at Lache Primary School
[2] Closures linked to establishment of nursery units at neighbouring schools
[3] Proposals in italics have yet to be implemented

Capital Modernisation Fund

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to make further allocations from the Capital Modernisation Fund which will benefit disadvantaged communities. [119655]

Mr. Wills: We are pleased to announce that £10 million is being allocated from the Capital Modernisation Fund to help bridge the digital divide in the most disadvantaged communities. The initiative will do this by wiring up communities to enable people living in them to use the new information and communications technologies to access jobs, learning opportunities, Government and other services, and to help individuals and their communities fulfil their potential.

School Funding

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by what means each school will receive the additional direct funding announced in the Budget; and what conditions will be applied as to how the resources are to be spent. [119199]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* My right hon. Friend laid a special report, under section 88B of the Local Government Act 1988, before the House on 6 April. Once it has been approved, it will empower him to make payments to local authorities on condition that they pass those payments to schools, within a specified time period. The additional funding will be part of schools' delegated budgets, so they will be free to decide what to spend it on. It will give extra support to secondary schools in raising standards as part of the new Key Stage 3 programme, which will include: the setting of challenging school-level targets, and development of strategies to meet them, by all secondary schools with Key Stage 3 pupils for performance in the Key Stage 3 tests in 2002; and new Year 7 tests for pupils who have not yet achieved level 4 in English and maths. The tests will be available free in 2001 so that all secondary and middle schools can test all eligible pupils. The additional funding will help primary schools to meet the challenging literacy and numeracy targets they have set for both 2001 and 2002.

Community Learning

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future of community learning, its funding and the bodies that will be responsible for determining the provision of community learning in each local education authority area. [119494]

Mr. Wicks: In our Prospectus for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) we made it clear that adult and community learning is a vital part of the Government's plans to drive up achievement, widen participation in learning, and strengthen community confidence and capacity.

Our first consultation document on the funding of post 16 learning, published in January, confirmed the strategic contribution that local authorities, together with local Learning and Skills Councils, can make. The Learning and Skills Bill (Lords) now before Parliament includes the necessary provisions to allow this. The Secretary of State has already recognised the importance of local education authorities in adult and community learning by guaranteeing them a minimum level of funding in the first two years of the LSC, provided they maintain their spend in this area and effectively implement their lifelong learning plans.

Our second funding consultation document, to be published in May, will set out the roles of all those concerned in post 16 learning and invite comments on our proposals for funding, including the funding of adult and community learning.

ConneXions Service

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many staff will be employed by his Department, additional to the current establishment, as a result of the introduction of ConneXions. [119497]

Mr. Wicks: The ConneXions service will largely be staffed by existing civil servants, but will draw as necessary on secondees from other Government Departments, the voluntary, youth and private sectors where appropriate. We do not anticipate any significant increase in the current establishment.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the funding of the ConneXions service and its impact on local education authority budgets. [119496]

Mr. Wicks: The funding for the ConneXions service will come from the bringing together of existing resources devoted to youth support and guidance. We are also considering what additional resources will be needed and can be made available as part of the Government's Year 2000 Spending Review.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much time on average he estimates that a personal adviser will spend with each young person under the ConneXions service. [119500]

Mr. Wicks: This will depend on the needs of each individual young person.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how he plans to screen mentors in the ConneXions Service for their suitability to work with young people. [119144]

Mr. Wicks: The ConneXions service is responsible for the physical and emotional safety of all young people coming into contact with mentors. ConneXions partnerships will have responsibility for ensuring that personal checks have been completed on mentors working with young people.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many personal advisers will be employed in the ConneXions service. [119499]

Mr. Wicks: The ConneXions service will ensure that every young person, whatever their needs, has local access to appropriate high quality guidance and support during their teenage years. A key factor in achieving this will be to ensure that all young people have access to a personal adviser. It is too early at this stage to give precise information on the numbers of personal advisers to be employed by the ConneXions service. The service will be phased in from April 2001 and the ConneXions partnerships will be responsible for deciding how best to deliver the service in their area, in the light of local circumstances.

Piloting of the service which is due to start shortly will provide helpful information on the number of personal advisers needed.

Contracted-out Services

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many youth workers, careers officers and education welfare officers are employed by *(a)* local education authorities, *(b)* careers services and *(c)* other contracted-out services. [119498]

Mr. Wicks: There are just under 8,000 full-time equivalents employed on work delivering careers service contracts. This includes careers officers, assistant careers officers and staff employed in management and support functions. The number of careers staff employed outside careers services is unknown.

Numbers of youth workers are not collated centrally but the audit of youth services in local authorities in England based on 1996–97 data indicates that the number of full-time professional youth workers employed by local education authorities is about 3,200. In addition there are about 7,900 professionally qualified working part-time and about 16,000 not professionally qualified working part-time. The number of youth workers outside local education authorities is unknown but there are likely to be significant numbers in the voluntary sector.

The precise number of education welfare officers employed by local education authorities is not collated centrally but for England is estimated to be around 3,000.

School Sixth Forms

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how capital funding for sixth forms will be allocated under the new funding arrangements for post-16 years education. [119495]

Mr. Wicks: Arrangements for capital funding for school sixth forms will be unaffected by the new post-16 funding arrangements. Central capital funding by the Department for Education and Employment will continue to go directly to local education authorities and to schools.

Class Sizes

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what was the average size of sixth form classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in each of the last five years; [119409]

(2) how many pupils were taught at Key Stage 4 in classes with 30 or more pupils in maintained secondary schools in each of the last five years; [119412]

(3) how many sixth form classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools had *(a)* 25 or more and *(b)* 30 or more pupils in each of the last five years. [119418]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the tables.

Provisional national estimates of class sizes in maintained secondary schools, which were published on 12 April, found reductions between January 1999 and 2000 in the numbers of pupils in classes of 35 or more taught by one teacher. Overall, only 0.2 per cent. of pupils in maintained secondary schools in England were in classes of over 35 pupils. For 14 and 15-year-old pupils, only 0.1 per cent. of pupils are in classes of over 35, representing a fall of nearly one half between January 1999 and 2000. Similarly, within the same time period, the number of pupils aged 16 or more in classes over 35 also fell to only 775 pupils, a reduction in the number of pupils of about one third. These figures were published in a Statistical First Release, "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000 (15/2000)".

Number of classes in maintained secondary schools for pupils aged 16[1] and over taught by one teacher, by size of class in England: 1996–2000

Position as at January each year

Year	*Number of classes with 25 or more pupils*	*Number of classes with 30 or more pupils*
2000[2]	287	86
1999	238	73
1998	260	86
1997	251	72
1996	262	80

[1] Ages as 31 August (start of the academic year)

[2] Provisional

Average size of classes for pupils aged 16 or more[1] taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in England: 1996–2000

Position as at January

Year	
2000[2]	10.7
1999	10.5
1998	10.7
1997	10.8
1996	10.6

[1] Ages as at 31 August (start of the academic year)
[2] Provisional

Number of pupils in classes of 30 or more for pupils aged 14 and 15[1] taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in England: 1996–2000

Position as at January each year

Year	
2000[2]	133,717
1999	125,077
1998	116,325
1997	105,038
1996	106,350

[1] Ages as at 31 August (start of the academic year)
[2] Provisional

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools had more than 30 pupils in each of the last five years. [119416]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the table.

Number of classes with more than 30 pupils taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in England: 1996–2000—position as at January each year

Year	*30 pupils*	*All classes*
2000[1]	10,466	134,457
1999	9,790	132,283
1998	8,842	130,859
1997	7,695	129,663
1996	7,351	127,719

[1] Provisional

In respect of classes with more than 35 pupils taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools, provisional national estimates (published on 12 April) found reductions between January 1999 and January 2000 in the numbers of pupils in such classes. Overall, only 0.2 per cent. of pupils in maintained secondary schools in England were in classes of over 35 pupils. For 14 and 15-year-old pupils, only 0.1 per cent. of pupils are in classes over 35, representing a fall of nearly one half between January 1999 and 2000. Similarly, within the same time period, the number of pupils aged 16 or more in classes over 35 also fell to only 775 pupils, a reduction in the number of pupils of about one third. These figures were published in a Statistical First Release "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000 (15/2000)".

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average size of classes taught by one teacher in former grant-maintained secondary schools in each of the last five years. [119417]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the table. Class sizes in former grant-maintained secondary schools are generally smaller than those in local education authority maintained secondary schools.

Average size of classes taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in England: 1996–2000—position as at January

	Local education authority (LEA) maintained secondary schools	*Grant maintained (GM) secondary schools*	*Overall secondary*
2000[1, 2]	22.2	21.4	22.0
1999	22.1	21.1	21.9
1998	22.0	20.9	21.7
1997	21.9	20.9	21.7
1996	21.8	20.9	21.7

[1] Provisional
[2] Includes schools who, under the new framework, were redefined as Community or Voluntary-Aided schools

Provisional national estimates of class sizes in maintained secondary schools were recently published in Statistical First Release "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000 (15/2000)" on 12 April 2000.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what recent research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the effect of large class sizes, including in sixth forms, on secondary schools; [119413]

(2) what recent representations he has received on class sizes in secondary schools; [119414]

(3) what plans he has to reduce class sizes in secondary schools; and if he will make a statement; [119415]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State receives representations from time to time on various issues related to class sizes. The evidence, including from Ofsted, indicates that class size is most important at Key Stage 1. That is why we pledged to reduce the size of infant classes to 30 or below, ensuring that all children benefit, and helping to give young pupils the important start they need. We are well on track to deliver our pledge by September 2001 at the latest.

The average number of pupils in secondary classes is 22—about five fewer than in primary schools. The pupil/teacher ratio in secondary schools is 17.1—more than six lower than in primary schools. Class sizes in secondary schools have been rising steadily since 1998, when the figure was 19.9.

In the recent budget, secondary headteachers each received between £30,000 and £50,000. It remains for headteachers to decide how to use this money but, spent on teachers, the secondary pupil/teacher ratio could be reduced by 0.4. More generally, between 1997–98 and 2000–01, overall funding per secondary school pupil has increased in cash terms by some £580—an increase of around 20 per cent.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils were taught *(a)* English, *(b)* maths and *(c)* science in classes with 30 or more pupils taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [119411]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on the size of classes by subject area in maintained secondary schools in England is not collected by the Department.

Provisional national estimates of class size in maintained secondary schools were published in a Statistical First Release, "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000 (15/2000)", on 12 April 2000. This release is available from the Library.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list each local authority with pupils in classes of 36 or more taught by one teacher in maintained secondary schools, indicating the number of such pupils in each such local authority. [119410]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on classes of size 36 or more for secondary schools by local education authority area has been placed in the Library.

Provisional national estimates of class sizes in maintained secondary schools, which were published on 12 April, found reductions between January 1999 and 2000 in the numbers of pupils in classes of 36 or more taught by one teacher. Overall, only 0.2 per cent. of pupils in maintained secondary schools in England were in classes of over 35 pupils. For 14 and 15-year-old pupils, as few as 0.1 per cent. of pupils are in classes over 35, representing a fall of nearly one half between January 1999 and 2000. Similarly, within the same time period, the number of pupils aged 16 or more in classes over 35 fell to only 775 pupils, a reduction in the number of pupils of about one third. These figures were published in a Statistical First Release, "Class sizes in maintained schools in England: January 2000 (15/2000)".

Special Educational Needs

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children had statements of special educational needs by age in each year since 1995; and what percentage of the total school under 18 years population this represented. [119536]

Jacqui Smith: Information on the number of children with statements of special educational need (SEN) by age has been published centrally since 1997. The latest information available is as follows:

Age	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Under 5	8,440	8,999	8,631	9,167
5–15	208,204	215,909	—	—
5–10	—	—	94,826	97,150
11–15	—	—	126,508	134,162
16–19	12,545	13,650	14,763	15,105

These figures relate to all children for whom LEAs maintain a statement including children not placed in schools. The table reflects the years in which the information was collected and a change in the age bands used to collect it from 1998.

The percentage of the total under 18 school population with statements of SEN in each of the years 1995 to 1999 is 2.6 per cent., 2.8 per cent., 2.9 per cent. and 3.0 per cent. respectively.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children with statements of special educational needs were in designated special units within *(a)* primary schools up to and including year six and *(b)* secondary schools from year seven onwards in each year since 1995. [119537]

Jacqui Smith: Information on the number of children with statements of SEN in designated special units within primary schools and secondary schools is not collected centrally.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which local authorities in England and Wales have *(a)* adopted and *(b)* implemented the form of assessment recommended in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority document "Supporting the Target Setting Process-Guidance for effective target setting for pupils with special educational needs". [119535]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is not collected centrally.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) commissioned Durham University to undertake a monitoring exercise last summer to ascertain the extent to which the P scales, the assessment framework proposed in the publication 'Supporting the Target Setting Process—Guidance for effective target setting for pupils with special educational needs', are being used in schools. 313 schools, including 116 mainstream and 197 special schools, took part in the survey. The exercise was supported by the 63 local education authorities (LEAs) in which the schools are situated.

A further monitoring survey on the P scales planned for next summer will specifically examine the use made by LEAs of the P scales, as well as school take up and use.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what percentage of the primary schools in England and Wales have been placed on special measures in each year since 1995; [119540]

(2) what percentage of primary schools with local education authorities designated special needs units have been placed on special measures in each year since 1995 in England and Wales. [119534]

Ms Estelle Morris: The percentage of primary and maintained and non-maintained special schools which have been placed in special measures since 1995 is contained in the table. While there are some special schools which cater for pupils wholly of primary school age, or wholly of secondary school age, there are many others which cover age ranges bridging part or the whole of the primary and secondary phases. The attached table does not distinguish between special schools covering the wide number of possible different age ranges. The figures in the table represent the proportion of all primary and maintained and non-maintained special schools which were inspected by Ofsted during that academic year and deemed to be in need of special measures.

Academic Year	Primary	Specials
	Percentage	
1994–95	0.20	0.50
1995–96	0.40	2
1996–97	0.80	3
1997–98	1	3
1998–99	0.80	1

Higher Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what information he has collated on admission to higher education institutions broken down by the nature of the educational establishment previously attended in each of the last five years. [119145]

Mr. Wicks: The information is given in the table, based on students gaining places on full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses through UCAS. Equivalent data for admissions to part-time undergraduate courses are not available.

UCAS UK-domiciled acceptances to higher education institutions by previous educational establishment

Accepted applicants	Year of entry[1] 1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Grammar School	16,935	17,048	18,643	18,954	19,285
Sixth Form Centre	3,574	3,800	2,720	2,732	2,913
Comprehensive	68,322	71,803	77,241	79,584	81,050
Other Secondary School	1,243	1,398	1,622	1,729	1,782
Independent School	29,441	30,006	31,342	30,602	30,910
Sixth Form College	23,787	25,182	29,978	29,548	29,829
Other FE/HE	72,466	68,871	81,809	75,561	73,019
Other	9,092	10,073	9,066	7,639	7,480
Not known	40,676	40,108	50,897	51,871	56,797
Total	265,536	268,289	303,318	298,220	303,065

[1] Figures for 1997 and later years include students applying for Art and Design courses which were included in the UCAS scheme for the first time in 1997.

Learning and Skills (Humberside)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision has been made for representatives of the Humber colleges to be members of the Humber Task Force overseeing the transition from TECs to learning and skills councils. [117832]

Mr. Wicks: The role of the Humber task group is not to oversee the transition of the TEC into the Learning and Skills Council but rather to collect information from current funding bodies (such as TECs, FEFC, and Local Education Authorities) on the range and volume of provision currently being funded in each area. The aim is to ensure that sufficient funds will be available in each area to at least maintain current levels of provision and to avoid disruption for learners resulting from the introduction of the new arrangements.

Since they are not funding bodies there is no requirement for a direct representative of Humber colleges on the Humber task group, although a college principal who is a chair of one of the four Local Learning Partnerships has been invited to join the task group.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in how many TEC areas in Yorkshire and Humberside local further education colleges are not directly represented on task forces overseeing the transition from TECs to learning and skills councils. [117833]

Mr. Wicks: There are nine TEC areas in Yorkshire and the Humber region. Four Learning and Skills Councils are planned for the region and there are, therefore, four task groups in the region. The role of these task groups is not to oversee the transition of the TECs to the Learning and Skills Council but rather to collect information from current funding bodies (such as TEC, FEFC, and Local Education Authorities) on the range and volume of provision currently being funded in each area. The aim is to ensure that sufficient funds will be available in each area to at least maintain current levels of provision and to avoid disruption for learners resulting from the introduction of the new arrangements.

Since they are not funding bodies there are no representatives of local colleges on any of the task groups in each region, although a college principal does sit on the South Yorkshire task group because of the wider remit that the group has identified to link LSC development with objective 1 status for South Yorkshire.

Waltham Forest LEA

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what publication date has been set for the Ofsted report on the London Borough of Waltham Forest local education authority; and if HM Chief Inspector of Schools has power to publish Ofsted local education authority reports without consulting the local education authority concerned as to the publication date. [119408]

Ms Estelle Morris: This is a matter for HM Chief Inspector of Schools and I have therefore asked Chris Woodhead to write to the hon. Member and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Basic Skills Agency

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on *(a)* his quinquennial assessment of the Basic Skills Agency, *(b)* his plans for its continued public funding and *(c)* its relationship with work to improve adult literacy standards being conducted within his own Department. [119146]

Mr. Wicks: The Department's quinquennial review of the Basic Skills Agency is now in its final stages; the resulting report will be placed in the Library of the House. We anticipate that the Agency will continue in its present role at the forefront of innovation and development in basic skills and will continue to receive public funding to support that role.

Work has already begun on a number of new measures to tackle the problem of poor basic skills among adults, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State plans to announce a full national strategy for the longer term later this year. To manage the implementation of this national strategy we are setting up a new Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit at the Department for Education and Employment. The new Unit and the Basic Skills Agency

will need to work closely together in carrying out their separate but complementary roles in support of the national strategy.

LEA Funding Bids

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each local education authority in Hampshire the *(a)* number and *(b)* value of funding bids made to his Department in (i) the financial year 1979–80, (ii) the financial year 1990–91 and (iii) each financial year from 1992–93 to 1998–99 for the repair of school buildings. [116021]

Jacqui Smith: The three tables answer the hon. Gentleman's question for the financial years from 1995–96 to 1998–99. We have no access to records for any years before then.

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Year	*Number of bids*	*Value of bids*
Hampshire		
1995–96[1]	17	4,600
1996–97[1]	12	5,893
1997–98	40	12,949
1998–99	171	23,970
Southampton[2]		
1997–98	12	3,946,000
1998–99	86	4,421,205
Portsmouth[2]		
1997–98	9	2,776,000
1998–99	125	2,864,862

[1] Figures for 1995–96 and 1996–97 do not include bids made under the Schools Renewal Challenge Fund.
[2] Before 1997–98, all Portsmouth and Southampton schools were maintained by Hampshire LEA.

Student Loans Company

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guarantees of minimum service he has set for the Student Loans Company; [119039]

(2) what monitoring procedures he has put in place to measure the efficiency of the Student Loans Company; and if he will make a statement on performance to date. [119040]

Mr. Wicks: We set the Student Loans Company challenging performance targets each financial and academic year, which are detailed and reported on in the Company's Annual Report. Targets for the financial year 1999–2000 and academic year 1999–2000 cover lending, tuition fees, collections, customer services, managing the sold loans portfolio, and the Company's operating costs.

The latest published performance against our targets is set out in the Company's 1999 Annual Report, copies of which are available in the House Libraries.

Education Maintenance Allowances

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to extend Education Maintenance allowances beyond the pilot schemes currently in operation; when he will announce a timetable for extending the scheme; and what criteria local education authorities must satisfy to qualify for inclusion in the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme. [119037]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 29 March 2000 that an additional £50 million will be allocated from September 2000 to expand the education maintenance allowance (EMA) pilots. The new money will allow us to expand some of the original pilots and to introduce EMAs in 40 new areas (which were set out in the Secretary of State's announcement). We will shortly announce the model that each new area will be testing.

We have chosen a selection of new areas where we believe the EMA has the potential to make the most difference. They have relatively low post-16 participation, low GCSE attainment and high deprivation. The choice of areas also includes some additional rural areas where we will be concentrating on transports costs.

The new pilots will mean that EMAs will be available in almost a third of the country. We will be monitoring the new pilots carefully to inform future decisions about EMAs, including whether to expand further.

PRIME MINISTER

New Zealand Honours List

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he has had with the Government of New Zealand concerning the possible discontinuance by New Zealand of the practice of making nominations for knighthoods and damehoods. [119032]

The Prime Minister: None. This is a matter between the Government of New Zealand and its Head of State.

Pig Farmers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Prime Minister if he will visit Parliament Square to meet the protesters there; and if he will ensure that the state aid available to pig farmers is processed and paid as a matter of urgency. [119447]

The Prime Minister: Under state aid rules, the European Commission must approve a scheme before it can be introduced. The scheme we announced at the farming summit on 30 March has already been formally notified to the Commission, which has two months to respond. The scheme will be introduced as soon as possible following Commission approval.

WWI Executed Soldiers (Pardons)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to discuss pardons for soldiers executed in the First World War when he next meets the Prime Minister of New Zealand. [119159]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* There are no such plans. The Government's position was outlined by the then Minister for the Armed Forces, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), in a statement on 24 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1372–75.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister on how many occasions in the past two years he has met representatives of *(a)* farming unions, *(b)* the Country Landowners Association, *(c)* the Country Sports Organisation and *(d)* the Old Age Pensioners Association. [118888]

The Prime Minister: Over the past two years I have met farmers, countryside representatives and pensioners at a number of events. Specific examples include meetings with farmers representatives at the farming summit on 30 March 2000, countryside representatives on 11 November 1999 and pensioners at a reception for older people held on 14 June 1999. In addition, during the course of my visits throughout the country I meet and talk to a wide range of people, including pensioners and people from rural communities on a regular basis.

Colombia

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if Her Majesty's Government will discuss with other donor countries the Plan Colombia mechanisms for monitoring progress on human rights, including contact with Colombian non-governmental human rights organisations; [119450]

(2) if he raised human rights improvement during discussions on Plan Colombia with President Pastrana. [119449]

The Prime Minister: Following his talks with President Pastrana on 13 April, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs announced that the United Kingdom would be willing to convene a gathering of interested countries at official level to study the proposals in Plan Colombia in advance of the donors conference planned for July in Spain. Monitoring progress on human rights will be one of the areas discussed. During the talks on 13 April, President Pastrana reaffirmed his commitment to ensure respect for human rights.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Prime Minister what recent discussions he has had with the President of Colombia concerning British assistance for Plan Colombia. [119050]

The Prime Minister: I met President Pastrana on 13 April. We exchanged views on a number of issues, including how the international community might help President Pastrana take forward the peace process in his country. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs announced that the United Kingdom was willing to convene a gathering of interested countries at official level to study the proposals in Plan Colombia in advance of the donors conference planned for July in Spain.

DEFENCE

Weapons of Mass Destruction

2. **Mr. Hammond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent assessment has been made by his Department of the threat to the United Kingdom from *(a)* nuclear, *(b)* biological and *(c)* chemical weapon attack. [117880]

Mr. Hoon: As of today, our assessment is that there is no current significant threat to the UK from weapons of mass destruction. Obviously, however, we continue to monitor developments closely in conjunction with our Allies.

Royal Navy Ship Orders

24. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he last met management and trade union representatives from the shipbuilding industry to discuss the placing of contracts for the construction of vessels required by the Royal Navy. [117904]

Dr. Moonie: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and my noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence Procurement have met both management and trade union representatives from the shipbuilding industry within the last two weeks.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will announce the next round of orders of ships for the Royal Navy. [117899]

Mr. Hoon: We hope to be in a position to announce a preferred bidder to meet our long-term strategic sealift requirement later this year. We also expect to place contracts for Survey Vessels during the summer, for Demonstration and First of Class Manufacture of the new Type 45 Anti-Air Warfare Destroyer in the autumn, and for the Alternative Landing Ship Logistic (ALSL) in late 2000. Over the longer term, our plans call for the manufacture of over 30 new major warships with contracts being placed at the appropriate time.

Kosovo

26. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the security situation in Kosovo. [117906]

29. **Mrs. Mahon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the military situation in Kosovo. [117909]

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the security situation in Kosovo. [117897]

Mr. Spellar: KFOR and UNMIK face a challenging security situation in Kosovo. Ethnic intimidation and violence continues, often orchestrated by a small number of extremists. British forces are making a major contribution to addressing these problems. We will ensure that British forces committed to KFOR are at the right strength, and have the necessary equipment to do their job.

We decided recently to deploy additional helicopters and unmanned aerial reconnaissance vehicles to improve KFOR's intelligence gathering capability. We are also deploying 60 members of the Ministry of Defence police to reinforce the UNMIK police, joining some 100 United Kingdom police officers already serving in Kosovo.

European Defence Co-operation

27. **Mr. Plaskitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made since the Helsinki summit in improving European defence co-operation. [117907]

Mr. Hoon: We continue to make excellent progress on the European defence initiative. At the recent informal European Council in Lisbon, EU member states agreed the process for taking forward the commitment to improving capabilities made at Helsinki. The interim bodies necessary for the EU to decide on military matters were established in March.

MOD Employees (North-east)

30. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of his uniformed and civil employees are based in the North-east region; and what percentage of his uniformed employees were recruited in the North-east region. [117910]

Mr. Spellar: As at 1 October 1999 the Ministry of Defence had one per cent. of its uniformed and civilian employees based in the North-East region. These are the latest figures that are available.

The three Services recruited the following numbers of uniformed personnel in the North-east region in the financial year 1999–2000:

Royal Navy Rating Entrants 8 per cent.

Army Officers and Other Ranks 8.36 per cent.

RAF, Officers and Airmen 15.39 per cent.

There are no statistics available for Naval Officer entrants for the region as these were calculated on a different basis.

The figures represent entrants who joined through recruiting offices in the North-east region and do not necessarily mean that they are from the region.

Child Support Agency

31. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress is being made on reforming the service restrictions affecting deductions from service personnel pay to ensure that Child Support Agency deduction of earnings orders can be fully implemented. [117911]

Mr. Spellar: The purpose of Minimum Rates of Pay is to protect Service personnel and their families from hardship. Of the Child Support Agency maintenance awards made against Service parents, 99 per cent. are met in full. In only one in a hundred Service cases is less than the full amount of a maintenance award being paid. This contrasts with the current Child Support Agency average of only 40 per cent. of parents paying in full, with 30 per cent. paying nothing at all. Nevertheless, consideration is being given to reforming minimum Service pay regulations.

Defence Medical Services

32. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on recruitment and retention of staff in Defence Medical Services. [117912]

Dr. Moonie: As we have previously acknowledged, there are serious shortages of manpower in the regular Defence Medical Services. Manning levels over the last year have been fairly stable although the numbers leaving on premature voluntary retirement continue at higher levels than we would wish. Recruitment into training is generally satisfactory, with nurse training places and medical cadetships having been increased. Direct entry recruitment of qualified personnel is difficult, particularly of qualified doctors. Measures to improve both retention and direct entry recruitment are under consideration.

Bulgaria and Turkey

33. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contact his Department has had with *(a)* the headquarters of the South-East Europe Brigade at Plovdiv in Bulgaria and *(b)* the Partnership for Peace study centre at Ankara, Turkey. [117913]

Mr. Spellar: The United Kingdom Ministry of Defence has had limited informal contacts with the Headquarters South-East Europe Brigade, Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and the Partnership for Peace study centre in Ankara, Turkey. In the case of the Headquarters, a visit was made on 21 March by a group of Staff and Students from the Joint Services Command and Staff College during a regional tour, accompanied by the British Defence Attaché, Sofia. There has been contact between the Commander and Staff of the Partnership for Peace study centre, Ankara, and the UK Officer attached to the Regional Training Centre, Bucharest, which also has recognition as a Partnership for Peace training centre.

Representatives from the UK Armed Forces are due to attend two events at the Ankara centre later this year.

Air Transport

34. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to procure new transport aircraft to meet his Department's short-term strategic airlift requirement. [117914]

36. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the RAF's air transport capabilities. [117916]

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to procure heavy-lift aircraft in the short and medium term. [117878]

Mr. Hoon: We are continuing to assess the proposals for both our short-term and longer term airlift requirements and hope to be in a position to make a decision in the next few weeks.

RAF Scampton

35. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what units, apart from the Red Arrows, will be based at RAF Scampton. [117915]

Mr. Spellar: Currently, there are no plans to base other RAF units at RAF Scampton. However, following my recent announcement that the Red Arrows will be based at Scampton, (subject to TU consultation), we will consider ways of maximising MOD use of the retained estate. In addition, we have agreed that the firm of Bombardier can use one of the surplus hangars for aircraft maintenance, which will create job opportunities in the local area. There should also be scope to market surplus hangar capacity on the airfield site.

Recruitment

37. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if each armed service has fulfilled its recruiting targets for 1999–2000. [117917]

Mr. Spellar: The latest available figures for recruits against the 1999–2000 intake targets for each of the Armed Services are:

	Intake	*Percentage of target*
Naval Service	4,954	99
Army	15,671	95
RAF	4,130	96
Total Services	24,755	96

Defence Logistics Organisation

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress in establishing the Defence Logistics Organisation. [117883]

Mr. Spellar: We have met the Strategic Defence Review commitment to create a single unified Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO) on time, on 3 April this year. The DLO is committed to reducing its costs by 20 per cent. by the year 2005, and these savings will go towards our continuing programme of modernisation for the UK's Armed Forces. DLO key initiatives include a lean support programme; a reduction in non-explosive stocks; about 20 per cent. reduction in current storage capacity; the introduction of the Government Purchasing Card and the development of a Defence Electronic Commerce Service.

Balkans

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of the reserve forces in supporting the regular Army in Bosnia and Kosovo. [117891]

Mr. Spellar: We continue to value the significant contribution which the reserve forces make to operations in the Balkans.

The reserves have consistently provided between 10 and 14 per cent. of the manpower for the UK's contribution to NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia since operations commenced in 1995. Currently, reservists represent some 13 per cent. of the UK force in Bosnia and some 10 per cent. in Kosovo; indeed, 18 personnel from the Royal Monmouthshire Militia based in my hon. Friend's constituency have volunteered for service in the Balkans since July 1998.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel have been *(a)* injured and *(b)* killed, in (i) Kosovo and (ii) Bosnia since NATO land forces have been involved; how many have left the UK armed services as a result of injuries sustained while there; and if he will make a statement. [119151]

Mr. Spellar: Since NATO land forces have been involved, four personnel have been killed in the Kosovo theatre of operations and 26 in the Bosnia theatre of operations to date. Injuries have been reported in respect of nine personnel in the Kosovo theatre of operations and 261 in the Bosnia theatre of operations in the period up to the end of 1999. All figures are in respect of regular armed forces personnel.

Information in respect of the number of personnel who have left the armed forces as a result of injuries sustained in Kosovo and Bosnia is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Military Equipment Contracts

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate *(a)* the number of contracts for the (i) repair and (ii) modification of military equipment and *(b)* their cumulative value which in 1998–99 were subject to (A) an open and (B) a restrictive tender. [117895]

Dr. Moonie: In 1998–99 there were 2,307 contracts awarded for repair activities. Of these, 1,211 with a cumulative value of around £278 million were awarded as a result of competition, and the remaining 1,096 (valued at around £676 million) were non-competitive.

In the same year, 224 contracts for modification of equipment were awarded. Of these, 120 contracts with a cumulative value of around £14 million were awarded as a result of competition. The remaining 104 contracts (valued at around £66 million) were non-competitive.

De-mining

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance his Department is giving in the clearing of land mines. [117898]

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps his Department is taking to assist those involved in humanitarian de-mining. [117892]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friends to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) today, *Official Report*, column 688.

US National Missile Defence System

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what co-operation his Department is having with the US Department of Defense concerning the National Missile Defence system. [117908]

Mr. Hoon: We have dialogue with the US Administration on their possible deployment of a National Missile Defence system. The US has not asked for UK assistance in the deployment of the system, nor would we expect them to do so until after a US decision has been made on whether or not to proceed with its deployment.

DERA

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to ensure that the effectiveness of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency will be maintained if the proposals for its part-privatisation are implemented. [118987]

Mr. Hoon: The Government concluded in the Strategic Defence Review that, in order to guarantee the ability of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) to continue to conduct world-class research, we would harness the opportunities offered by a Public Private

Partnership. Last year's consultation exercise on a potential PPP proposal produced a wide range of useful comments from stakeholders.

As a result of this process, I announced in October that we would be widening the scope of our discussion to take these comments into account. That work is now complete and has led to the development of two revised models for potential PPP structures, known as "Core Competence" and the "Public Sector Option". A detailed evaluation of these options indicates that Core Competence best meets the PPP objectives while also responding to the views of stakeholders. Both models are described in a consultation document which has been placed in the Library of the House and which is also available on the internet at www.mod.uk/commercial/ppp/dera/.

The essence of Core Competence is a clear separation of those functions which are best developed within a PPP, and those which are best performed wholly within Government. Around three quarters of DERA would be turned into a company, which we would hope to float on the stock market as soon as its potential is judged to be suitably developed. A core of staff would be retained wholly within the MOD to provide a high level overview of defence science and technology. This ensures that MOD would retain access to in-house impartial advice and allows management of the defence research programme and international research collaboration. Specific very sensitive areas and programmes would also be retained.

I believe that this approach would create two vibrant sustainable organisations. The new company would have the freedom to flourish, to grow its business and to diversify the wealth of knowledge it has built up over the years to the benefit of the wider UK economy while still providing the MOD with the essential services we will continue to need long into the future. The retained organisation will be a small but also world-class organisation offering rewarding careers within MOD and the wider civil service.

This approach is good for DERA, good for MOD and good for the wider UK economy. It will provide the UK technology sector with added impetus and ensure we are well placed to take on the challenges and opportunities offered by the 21st century.

All stakeholders are now being invited to submit their views on the revised proposals. As the exercise has proved, we are willing to listen and to respond to comments before taking a final decision.

Army (Drugs Offences)

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if it is the practice that soldiers convicted of serious charges relating to drugs offences and who *(a)* are facing or *(b)* have served custodial sentences are dismissed from the Army; and if he will make a statement. [118879]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* All soldiers, wherever they are serving, are liable for Compulsory Drug Testing (CDT). CDT is primarily an administrative, not a disciplinary matter. Following a positive test result or the refusal to provide a specimen, an Army officer would be required to resign, and a soldier will normally be administratively discharged. A commanding officer does, however, have the discretion to retain soldiers of the rank of Lance Corporal or below if:

(a) It was the first occasion on which drug misuse had been detected, or the first occasion on which he or she had refused to undergo testing, and

(b) In the case of a positive test result, no trace of Class A drugs was detected and,

(c) In all other respects the individual is considered a good serviceman or woman whose retention would be in the interest of the service.

To serve a custodial sentence a soldier would need to be found guilty of a disciplinary offence following which the rules contained in Queen's Regulations 9.404 would come into effect. The rules state that a soldier is to be discharged if he has been sentenced by a civil court or by court-martial to imprisonment or to detention or to any other form of custodial sentence. If in the opinion of the commanding officer there are exceptional reasons that make retention of the soldier desirable then the case is to be submitted with valid and explicit reasons to the Director of Manning (Army) for a decision.

Defence Estate Review

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will publish the conclusions of his Department's review of the Defence Estate in Greater London. [119317]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend the then Under-Secretary of State gave the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) on 18 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 405–06W.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Lime Grove site owned by his Department in Eastcote, Middlesex. [119319]

Dr. Moonie: The Eastcote site was formally transferred to my Department by the Department of Trade and Industry on 31 March 2000. Its future is being considered as part of our wider review of the Department's estate holdings in London. If it is determined that the Eastcote site is surplus to defence needs, the property will be disposed of.

Married Quarters

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many military married quarters were sold in the UK during 1999; and how much revenue was raised by the sales. [118833]

Dr. Moonie: The majority of Service Families Accommodation (SFA) in England and Wales was sold to Annington Homes Limited (AHL) on 5 September 1996, on a 999-year lease. The Ministry of Defence leases back those properties it requires to house Service families on a 200-year lease. Those properties not required for Service use are released to AHL, as they become available. 1,472 properties were disposed of in this way in 1999 calendar year. The amount raised from these sales is a matter for AHL.

In addition, Defence Estates remains responsible for a small number of SFA's in England and Wales and all of those in Scotland. Of these, 478 have been disposed of in the period providing revenue of £10,437,516.

RAF Neatishead

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of RAF Neatishead. [119283]

Mr. Spellar: As I explained in my letter of 5 April to the hon. Member, work in relation to the future of RAF Neatishead is ongoing. It is hoped that this work will be completed by late spring, when I will write to the hon. Member again. A copy of the letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

US-licensed Anthrax Vaccine

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his letter of 19 March, Ref. D/Min/(AF)JS/0906/00/P, what conclusions he has drawn from his scrutiny of the report of the Congressional Committee on National Security which reviewed the US Department of Defense's policy on the use of US-licensed anthrax vaccine and the way in which that policy had been implemented. [117973]

Mr. Spellar: We have studied the Committee's report and a response by the US Department of Defense refuting the Committee's findings. These concerned both the safety and efficacy of the US anthrax vaccine and the scope of the US Department of Defense's mandatory immunisation programme. The anthrax vaccine produced in the UK differs from the US product and is administered in a different way. Independent advice in both the UK and the US has confirmed that vaccination against anthrax is safe and effective. Against this background, it remains our policy that vaccination against anthrax has an important part to play as one of a range of measures to provide protection against biological weapons for our armed forces.

RAF Bruggen

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the expenditure on *(a)* runway resurfacing, *(b)* hardened bunkers and *(c)* other capital expenditure at RAF Bruggen over the past five years. [119182]

Mr. Spellar: No expenditure at RAF Bruggen has been incurred on the provision of runway resurfacing or hardened bunkers over the past five years. Other capital expenditure on facilities at Bruggen over this period amounts to £9.295 million, including VAT. These facilities will be used by the Army, who will be transferring units there when the RAF withdraw.

TREASURY

Minimum Wage and Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when definitive estimates on the number of people who have benefited from *(a)* the national minimum wage and *(b)* the working families tax credit by parliamentary constituency will be available; and if he will make a statement. [114569]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested on the national minimum wage falls within the responsibility of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). I understand from ONS that definitive estimates by constituency of the number of people that have benefited from the national minimum wage are not yet available. Up to the end of March 2000, there had been 1.03 million awards made of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) in the United Kingdom. Available figures by constituency are given in the tables which have been deposited in the Library.

C154 Certificates

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many C154 certificates have been issued since the start of the scheme; and how many requests for C154 certificates have been rejected. [118605]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue has issued 781,742 registration cards. This includes not only permanent cards but also temporary cards and replacement cards. The Inland Revenue does not keep a record of applications where registration cards are refused.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what checks on eligibility are made in respect of an applicant before a C154 certificate is issued. [118604]

Dawn Primarolo: Where a person works as a subcontractor on a contract to which the Construction Industry Scheme applies they must register with the Inland Revenue if the contractor is to comply with the rules of the scheme when paying them for the work they do. If the contractor does not comply with the rules of the scheme they may incur a penalty.

Subcontractors who are not eligible to receive a certificate entitling them to receive payment gross will be issued with a registration card. This card must be presented, in person, to the contractor before payment can be made. Payments to registration card holders are made after deduction of 18 per cent. on account of tax and Class 4 National Insurance. Under the old scheme, only those who wished to receive payment gross needed to apply to the Inland Revenue for a card. The registration card has been successful in ensuring that 50,000 subcontractors, who were previously unknown to the Inland Revenue, have now registered with a tax office.

In order to register for the scheme an individual must take a completed application form, together with a recent passport size photograph and two proofs of identify, one of which must carry a photograph and one must show their current address, to a tax office.

An individual who also has proof of their National Insurance number, which can be validated by the Inland Revenue through the NIRS system, will be issued with a permanent registration card—CIS4(P). An individual who is unable to provide proof of their National Insurance number, or whose number cannot be validated, is issued with a temporary registration card—CIS4(T) which is only valid for up to three months. The temporary registration card is replaced once the Inland Revenue has validated the individual's National Insurance number.

To date the Inland Revenue have issued approximately 61,000 temporary registration cards, of which over 54,000 have now expired.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people will receive the Working

Families Tax Credit from 18 April *(a)* in the Stoke-on-Trent, South constituency and *(b)* in Stoke-on-Trent as a whole. [118591]

Dawn Primarolo: For the Stoke-on-Trent, South constituency, I refer my hon. Friend to my answer today, *Official Report*, column 370W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden). It is estimated that 6,200 families in Stoke-on-Trent have been awarded the Working Families Tax Credit by the end of March 2000.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families are in receipt of the working families tax credit in the Crosby constituency; and what percentage they constitute of the total number of families in the constituency. [118685]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to my answer today, *Official Report*, column 370W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) for the number of Working Families Tax Credit awards in Crosby. Estimates of the number of families at constituency level are not available.

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in Dartford will benefit from the increase in the under-16 child credit in the working families tax credit. [118823]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer today, *Official Report*, column 370W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden). Almost all families having new awards, or renewing awards, from June 2000 will benefit from the increase in the under 16 child credit.

Helen Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families are in receipt of the working families tax credit in *(a)* Warrington and *(b)* Warrington North constituency. [118856]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is contained in the table relating to the answer I have today given my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden), *Official Report*, column 370W.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his Department's energy efficiency performance target expressed as a percentage change in comparison to 1990–91 for each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [118993]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 548–49W. It was explained then that a new target had been set across the Government estate to apply from 2000–01, of a 1 per cent. per annum reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. My Department will aim to meet this target. It represents a change against the previous cross Government target to 31 March 2000 which was expressed in terms of reductions in energy expenditure. Measurement in greenhouse gas emissions provides a much better fit with the current climate change programme and the UK's Kyoto targets. The base year will be 1999–2000 as it was the final year to which the previous target applied. Figures will be released when they are available on performance in 1999–2000 against the target to 31 March 2000 with 1990–91 as the base year.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the percentage change compared to 1990–91 in his Department's energy efficiency in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [118992]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 582W which reports progress for all central government departments by 31 March 1998. I hope to publish shortly results for the period up to March 1999.

Exports

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 187–88W, what assessment he has made of the recent trends in export volumes; and if he will make a statement. [118849]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to Chapter B (The Economy) of the Financial Statement and Budget Report published on 21 March 2000.

Tobacco Duties

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the hypothecated expenditure in the current financial year for the NHS resulting from the increase in tobacco duties announced in the Budget. [119214]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* The extra £2 billion in 2000–01 allocated for the National Health Service by the Chancellor in the Budget is inclusive of £235 million, which is the anticipated yield for the 5 per cent. real terms increase in tobacco duty in that year.

Anti-depressants

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on death caused by *(a)* Dothiepin and *(b)* other anti-depressant drugs. [118889]

Mr. Timms: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Kidgell to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 17 April 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), has been asked to reply to your recent question on the causes of death from Dothiepin and other anti-depressant drugs. I am replying in the Director's absence.

Information on the underlying causes of drug-related deaths where Dothiepin or other antidepressants are mentioned is given in the attached table. The data has been extracted from the ONS drug-related deaths database.

Number of drug-related deaths with a mention of Dothiepin or other anti-depressants by underlying cause, England and Wales usual residents, 1993–97

Underlying cause of death[1]	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Dothiepin[2]					
Drug dependence/abuse	3	1	4	5	2
Accident	40	38	34	44	37
Suicide and Undetermined	155	207	190	218	261
Drug Psychoses/assault	0	0	0	0	0
Total	198	246	228	267	255
Other Anti-depressants[3]					
Drug Dependence/abuse	3	5	5	5	6
Accident	59	37	47	68	52
Suicide and Undetermined	194	183	206	197	221
Drug Psychoses/assault	0	0	0	0	0
Total	256	225	258	270	279

[1] The underlying cause of death are categorised as follows:
Deaths with the underlying cause codes 304, 305.2–9, using ICD9 where the named substance was mentioned on the death certificate
Deaths with the underlying cause codes E850-E858, using ICD9 where the named substance was mentioned on the death certificate
Deaths with the underlying cause codes E950.0–5, E980.0–5, using ICD9 where the named substance was mentioned on the death certificate
Deaths with the underlying cause codes 292, E962.0, using ICD9 where the named substance was mentioned on the death certificate
[2] These figures for Dothiepin include all deaths where drugs containing Dothiepin Hydrochloride were mentioned (including any mention of the brand name Prothiaden)
[3] Death with a mention of antidepressants but with no mention of drugs containing dothiepin hydrochloride

Office for National Statistics

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out the reasons for the time taken to outsource Office for National Statistics projects as recommended by the Treasury Taskforce; and if he will make a statement on the current policy in respect of outsourcing work at the Office for National Statistics. [118885]

Mr. Timms: In February 1999, the then Economic Secretary announced a programme of efficiencies for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which was expected to release £20 million through a combination of internal efficiency and outsourcing. These savings would be reinvested in the ONS to improve the range and quality of the statistical information it produces.

The programme of internal efficiency has proceeded and is releasing savings. The outsourcing of the facilities management services is also nearing completion, according to the original timetable, and should offer the ONS considerable savings.

However, before any outsourcing of other activities, we have asked the ONS to review their business strategies and to consider to what extent the private sector can contribute to their achievement. Government policy remains to draw on the best of the public and private sector to deliver modern, high quality, public services.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to improve the efficiency of the Office for National Statistics, with particular reference to the in-sourcing of work that can be undertaken cost-effectively there. [118886]

Mr. Timms: The Office for National Statistics is currently undertaking an Efficiency Programme which aims, through a combination of internal efficiencies and outsourcing of central services, to release £20 million to improve the quality and range of its statistics.

The internal efficiencies achieved, since the beginning of the Programme in February 1999 are summarised as follows:

	Amount in 2000–01
IS development	205,000
IS consolidation	750,000
Accounts processing	100,000
Merge Marketing/Press	100,000
Merge Personnel/HRD	100,000
Reduce property holdings	300,000
Total	1,555,000

The ONS is also reviewing a range of other areas to achieve more internal efficiency savings. Examples of the activities involved include finance and planning, general administration and document output. In addition, business areas such as Business and Prices and the Registration service are undergoing major efficiency reviews which will consider the most cost effective approach to these areas of work.All of these internal efficiencies, together with the rest of the ONS Efficiency Programme, will help ensure that resources are focused towards the delivery of a high quality statistical service.

Environmental Taxes

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the losses to the National Insurance Fund from the reductions of employers' contributions resulting from the introduction of the landfill tax, the climate change levy and the aggregates levy *(a)* separately and *(b)* in total, for each year from their introduction to 2010–11; and what proposals he has to compensate the Fund for that loss. [118934]

Dawn Primarolo: Budget 2000 confirmed that the climate change levy will be introduced from April 2001 and the aggregates levy from April 2002. The revenues from these levies will be recycled to business through cuts in employer NICS of 0.3 and 0.1 percentage points respectively. This is consistent with the Government's approach to shifting the burden of taxation from "goods" such as labour to "bads" such as environmental pollution.

The estimated costs of the reduction in employer NICS for each year until 2010–11 are shown in the table. This represents the costs of a 0.3 percentage point reduction in employer NICS from April 2001 and a 0.4 percentage point reduction from April 2002.

£ billion

Year	*Exchequer cost of reduction in employer NICS*
2001–02	1.0
2002–03	1.4
2003–04	1.5
2004–05	1.6
2005–06	1.7
2006–07	1.7

£ billion

Year	Exchequer cost of reduction in employer NICS
2007–08	1.8
2008–09	1.9
2009–10	2.0
2010–11	2.1

The Treasury Grant provides a mechanism for the balances on the fund to be maintained at the level recommended by the Government Actuary as the appropriate minimum balance.

Betting Duty

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the actual and estimated yield from betting duty for the years 1996 to 2001. [119452]

Mr. Timms: Information on the actual yield from betting duty can be found in "HM Customs and Excise Annual Report", Table L2 "Betting, Gaming and Lottery: Receipts". The estimated yield from betting and gaming duties in 1999–2000 and in 2000–01 can be found in the "Financial Statement and Budget Report March 2000", Table C9 "Public Sector Current Receipts".

National Insurance Records

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he is taking to deal with delays in processing national insurance records in the Newcastle centre; and if he will make a statement. [117967]

Dawn Primarolo: Inland Revenue National Insurance Contributions Office process information onto National Insurance accounts, and although it is recognised that there have been delays in finalising this work in the Newcastle centre, they are implementing a programme of recovery to clear the work items on hand caused by earlier difficulties.

Constant monitoring ensures delays are kept to a minimum.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Electronic Tagging

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his oral statements of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 26–27 and 28 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 234, and to his answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and the Weald of 29 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 145W, what types of offender serving sentences of four or more years he estimates will be released earlier than at present as the result of the availability of electronic monitoring as a condition of release on licence, under the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, with particular reference to offenders convicted of *(a)* homicide, *(b)* drugs offences, *(c)* robbery, *(d)* assaults, *(e)* firearms offences, *(f)* burglary and *(g)* terrorist offences; if he will define the term serious offenders, used in his oral statement of 29 November; if it is his policy that the timing of the release of (i) serious, (ii) high-risk and (iii) sex offenders should not be influenced by the electronic monitoring provisions of the Bill; and if he will make a statement. [118307]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* The electronic monitoring measures in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill will not change the timing of any prisoner's eligibility for release. The basis of any discretionary release decision will continue to be careful risk assessment. The use of the new licence conditions will be subject to piloting before full implementation. Evaluation of the pilots will include consideration of the impact of the new licence conditions on discretionary release decisions taken by the Parole Board and by the Prison Service, on behalf of the Secretary of State.

In the vast majority of cases, we anticipate that the availability of electronic monitoring as a licence condition will have no impact on release decisions.

Prison Service Orders will make clear there are no circumstances in which the availability of the new electronic monitoring provisions in the Bill should influence decisions on release made by the Prison Service, on behalf of the Secretary of State.

In addition, using the powers available to him under section 32(6) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991, the Home Secretary will direct the Parole Board that in considering certain types of case, decisions on release should not be influenced by the availability of the new powers of electronic monitoring in the Bill. The Home Secretary's Directions to the Parole Board will cover any sex offender required to register under the Sex Offenders Act 1997, and any sexual or violent offender who is serving an "extended sentence" as provided for in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The Directions will also apply to all prisoners serving a licence sentence, to other prisoners serving a determinate sentence for homicide or attempted homicide, terrorism, arson, robbery or assault and to any other prisoner whose offending or other behaviour suggests that he poses a clear risk of violence to the public. This definition could include prisoners convicted of drugs offences, firearms offences or burglary, depending on the circumstances of the cases.

The types of case where the use of electronic monitoring may provide sufficient extra reassurance to influence a decision in favour of release are expected to be those where the Parole Board is considering prisoners who are at the lower end of the offending scale (within the category of prisoners eligible for parole), and who pose no obvious risk of violence to the public.

It is, therefore clear that the Home Secretary's policy is that the timing of the release of serious, high risk and sex offenders, as defined above, should not be influenced by the electronic monitoring provisions of the Bill.

The term "serious offenders" has different legal definitions in different contexts. In the context of my oral statement of 29 November, the term "serious offenders" was a reference to those prisoners serving sentences of four years or more who will be covered by the planned Directions to the Parole Board.

Immigration Checks (Young People)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what immigration checks are made on

(a) young children and *(b)* young people allowed into the UK; how such checks are followed up; and if he will make a statement. [118390]

Mrs. Roche: The normal requirements of the Immigration Rules apply to persons under the age of 18. For a British Citizen or other European Economic Area national the immigration officer establishes nationality and identity to confirm exemption from the immigration control. For other nationalities, the immigration officer must be satisfied that the individual is eligible for entry for the purpose requested.

Every effort is made to try to ensure that inquiries or an interview are conducted in the presence of a responsible adult either accompanying or meeting a child.

Once granted entry, the normal requirements apply in respect of those seeking an extension of stay, or with failure to observe the time limit which render the child's or young person's stay unlawful.

Metropolitan Police (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women from ethnic minority backgrounds are officers of the Metropolitan Police Force; and what ranks are held by these officers. [118502]

Mr. Straw: The information requested is given in the table, provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, and represents the position as at 31 March 2000.

Rank	Total Male	Female
Commander and above	2	0
Chief Superintendent	2	0
Detective Chief Superintendent	0	0
Superintendent	3	0
Detective Superintendent	0	0
Chief Inspector	4	0
Detective Chief Inspector	3	1
Inspector	16	1
Detective Inspector	5	0
Sergeant	70	6.69
Detective Sergeant	18	1
Constable	615.6	180.16
Detective Constable	75	12

Vulnerable Adults

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce legislation to make police checks on people working with vulnerable adults compulsory; and if he will make a statement. [118738]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Records Bureau, which is being established under Part V of the Police Act 1997, will provide information from police and criminal records to employers, voluntary organisations and others in positions of responsibility for vulnerable adults. The 1997 Act does not make such checks compulsory. It is for those organisations and others, including departments and authorities with responsibility for employing people in positions of trust, to lay down their particular vetting requirements and procedures. This might include legislating for particular sectors where this is considered appropriate.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that asylum seekers in receipt of food vouchers are able to purchase food required for dietary or religious reasons, including halal meat. [118869]

Mrs. Roche: Our voucher provider, Sodexho Pass, is required to ensure that vouchers can be exchanged in a wide variety of retail outlets. A number of major retail stores accept the vouchers. In addition, Sodexho Pass have contracted with a large number of independent retailers, including stores supplying specialist dietary or religious needs.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 366–68W, concerning applications for asylum, what grounds are required for admission of persons seeking asylum from each applicant state; what grounds have been regarded as acceptable in respect of those granted asylum; when he expects to publish complete figures for 1999; and what representations the Government have made to applicant Governments about such claims. [118865]

Mrs. Roche: All asylum applications, regardless of the applicant's nationality, are considered in accordance with the criteria set out in the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. To qualify for asylum a person must be outside his/her country of nationality and have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Those who meet these criteria are granted asylum; those who do not meet the requirements of the 1951 Convention may nevertheless be granted exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom if there are exceptional compelling humanitarian reasons why they should not be required to leave. Asylum statistics for 1999 are expected to be published in June 2000.

Ministers and officials regularly take the opportunity to discuss the question of migration to the United Kingdom with the Governments of applicant nations. These discussions include measures which may be taken to prevent the possible abuse of the United Kingdom's immigration legislation and asylum process.

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which cities have been judged appropriate for the housing of asylum seekers with HIV infection under the new dispersal arrangements. [118948]

Mrs. Roche: We have not selected particular areas for those with HIV infection. Instead, when asylum seekers make an application for asylum they are invited to indicate whether they have any special needs. Consideration is given on a case-by-case basis to those needs both in terms of the accommodation and support package and the proximity to any medical treatment which may be required.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost is to his Department as of the week commencing 9 April of placing *(a)* unaccompanied minors, *(b)* single asylum seekers and *(c)* asylum seekers' families with children in the cities of (i) Glasgow, (ii) Edinburgh, (iii) Liverpool, (iv) Sheffield and (v) Newcastle; and if he will make a statement. [118967]

Mrs. Roche: The information is not available.

The National Asylum Support Service has contracts with a number of private sector contractors. The information on contract price is commercially confidential. In any event, this information is not disaggregated by area of location.

The Home Office is not responsible for the costs of unaccompanied minors.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much the Government spent on research and development in relation to methods of conducting *(a)* animal experiments and *(b)* non-animal alternatives to vivisection in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [118826]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Most work done on alternatives is neither done by the Government nor with Government money. Nonetheless, each year, the Home Office makes available to the Animal Procedures Committee (APC) a budget for the research into the development and promotion of alternatives which replace animal use, reduce the number of animals used or refine the procedures involved to minimise suffering. Work aimed at improving the environmental conditions in which laboratory animals are kept and transported has also been sponsored. Through national advertising, the APC Research and Alternatives Sub-Committee invites applications for funding of suitable projects. It then selects the most appropriate and monitors progress. Details of completed research for 1998 is published in the Report of the Animal Procedures Committee for 1998.

The budget available to the Committee in 1998–99 for this purpose was £259,000 (an increase of 42 per cent. from £182,000 the previous year). However, this is not the only money spent by the Government on alternatives: other Departments also fund such work; estimates of spending reach approximately £2 million each year. Industry, too, spends millions of pounds each year on the search for and development of alternatives.

On an international level, the United Kingdom Government will continue to support the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods (now known as the Unit for the Validation of Biological Testing Methods) through contributions to the European Union. It is the unit's task to monitor and co-ordinate research into alternatives and to develop the processes of validation—that is, the assessment of alternative methods to see whether they are reliable and whether they produce a level of information similar to the animal based tests they are to replace. The lack of progress in some areas is more often due to the limitations of science than to inadequate funding.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what representations have been made to him on the LD50 tests in the last six months; and if he will make a statement; [118900]

(2) what representations have been made to him this year on licences for the LD50 tests; if his Department examines alternative methods before granting such licences; and if he will make a statement. [118902]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) on 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 624W and to the replies I gave the hon. Gentleman on 4 april 2000, *Official Report*, column 437W and on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 72W.

No new licences authorising the LD50 test (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development Guide 401) have been issued since 21 October 1999. Representations made on two licences under section 12 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 were both withdrawn recently and the licence holders have agreed to submit the licences for removal of authority for the LD50 test.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations have been made to him on reducing the number of dogs used in regulatory toxicology; and if he will make a statement. [118901]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government recognise the particular concern about the use of dogs in scientific procedures. Under the terms of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, animals may only be used where there are no alternatives and where the benefits of the programme outweigh any suffering caused to the animals concerned. In addition, certain species (such as dogs, cats and primates) can only be used where animals of no other species are suitable. Special conditions, tailored to each project, control and minimise any pain or suffering caused.

I receive correspondence from members of the public who find it particularly difficult to accept that species that are kept as domestic pets or companion animals are also used in procedures. Such animals must be purpose-bred and supplied only by designated establishments. Dogs are only used in about 0.25 per cent. of all procedures. (The results of this work have produced medicines which have cured illness, saved human lives and indeed added to veterinary science which have assisted animal care.)

I have not received representations direct, but I am aware of recent campaign material on the subject from the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection.

Animal Procedures Committee

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what advice *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials gave to the Chairman of the Animal Procedures Committee about the resignation of Dr. David Christopher from the Animal Procedures Committee in 1997; and what advice he has given to the Chairman about Gill Langley's membership of the Committee; [118907]

(2) when he was informed that Gill Langley was the author of the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection report on Harlan UK; [118905]

(3) following the report from Home Office officials on the credibility of the BUAV report on Harlan UK, what assessment he has made of the extent to which Gill Langley met the requirement for members of the Animal Procedures Committee to act in good faith and to the highest standards of impartiality, integrity and objectivity. [118906]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The authorship of the report of the findings of the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection investigation at Harlan UK Hillcrest (published in June 1999) was not formally notified to the Secretary of State until 29 March 2000. I understand that a member of the Animal Procedures Committee declared an interest when the subject was raised at the Committee's meeting on 9 February. I have no assessment to offer on her role as Committee member: nor has advice about her membership (which is an appointment made by the Secretary of State) been given to the Chairman.

Dr. Christopher resigned from the Animal Procedures Committee in 1997, after the establishment with which he was associated was investigated by the Home Office. Again, no direction was given by the Secretary of State nor officials to the then Chairman or to that member. As was proper, the Secretariat to the Committee advised the Chairman only on how to handle discussion of the investigation at the relevant meetings of the Committee.

Immigration Appeals

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the reasons are for the delay in the forwarding of appeals papers by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to the Appellate Authority, relating to the case of Immigration Reference No. GAN75908, Home Office Reference Number IMP01009547/2(S), PO23042/99, in accordance with assurances given to the hon. Member for Wakefield on 23 December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [118839]

Mrs. Roche: The Immigration Service sent the appropriate appeals papers for this case to the Appellate Authorities on 22 January 2000. Unfortunately there is no record of receipt. To avoid further delay, duplicate papers were then sent by facsimile on 10 March but, in this form, they were not acceptable to the Appellant Authority. The Immigration and Nationality Directorate will now forward a full bundle to the Authority as a matter of urgency.

Lord Archer

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many person-hours the Metropolitan police have committed to date to investigating the allegations that Lord Archer of Weston-Super-Mare had sought to persuade a potential witness to commit perjury in the *Daily Star* libel case. [118928]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that up to 12 April, members of the Organised Crime Group have spent approximately 720 hours on the investigation of allegations of perjury made against Lord Archer.

Crime Fighting Fund (Dartford)

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the 5,000 additional police officers which funding from the Crime Fighting Fund will create will be allocated to the Dartford area. [118825]

Mr. Straw: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement I made on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 172–74W, which set out details of the share of the 5,000 recruits under the Crime Fighting Fund for all forces in England and Wales. My reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1–3W gave details of additional money for fighting crime and that the three year Crime Fighting Fund would be brought forward with the aim of delivering the recruitment scheme over two years.

It is for the Chief Constable of Kent to decide how to deploy the additional officers he has been allocated under the Crime Fighting Fund. Power to set establishment levels for each force was removed by the previous Government in 1994, under the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994. It is for chief officers to determine staffing requirements within the overall resources available.

Police Vehicle Accidents

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured in each of the last five years in accidents involving police vehicles while answering emergency calls. [119206]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Figures dealing with responses to emergency calls are not available centrally as statistics collate them together with accidents arising from pursuits. Information has been provided by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, to whom forces submit statistical returns.

Police vehicle accidents arising from responses to emergency calls and pursuits: England and Wales

Year	*Injuries*	*Fatalities*
1994–95	1,830[1]	21[1]
1995–96	2,169[1]	21[1]
1996–97	1,930[2]	15[2]
1997–98	2,123	15
1998–99	1,863[2]	11[2]

[1] Figures from three forces missing from the total
[2] Figures from one force missing from the total

Crime (Alcohol and Drugs)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of crimes committed by those under the influence of *(a)* alcohol and *(b)* heroin in each of the last three years. [118890]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Statistical data are collected on offences involving alcohol or illegal drugs only, not on offences which may have been committed under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs. A report published in 1998 on research carried out during 1996 and 1997 on behalf of the Home Office by the University of

Cambridge sheds light on the links between alcohol, drugs and crime, Further data collected during 1998 and 1999 are currently being analysed as part of the NEW-ADAM programme for interviewing and drug testing arrestees. It is hoped to publish the next set of full results in the first half of this year.

The research undertaken so far on drug testing of arrestees, based in five locations, indicates that three-quarters (74 per cent.) of arrestees had recently taken at least one illegal drug and/or alcohol prior to arrest. The proportion of arrestees testing positive for alcohol average 25 per cent., while that for heroin/opiates was 18 per cent. These findings confirm the supposition that offenders tend to be heavy consumers of drugs.

While this study considerably advances knowledge of drugs-crime links, it will always be difficult to calculate a single percentage figure reflecting precisely what proportion of all crime is alcohol- or drug-related.

Figures on drug offences in 1998 were published in February 2000 in Home Office Statistical Bulletin Number 3/00 "Drug seizure and offender statistics, United Kingdom, 1998". Some alcohol-related statistics are also published. Figures on breath tests were published in Statistical Bulletin 16/99 "Breath Test Statistics, England and Wales, 1998", motoring offences in Statistical Bulletin 12/99 "Motoring Offences, England and Wales, 1997"; other offences involving alcohol are included in "Criminal Statistics England and Wales 1998" published in March 2000. Copies of all these publications are in the Library.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent in the past three years in prisons to deal with misuse of *(a)* illegal drugs and *(b)* alcohol. [118887]

Mr. Boateng: Information is readily available only about spending on elements of the drug strategy which are co-ordinated centrally. The figures are:

1997–98: £9 million

1998–99: £9 million and, following the Comprehensive Spending Review,

1999–2000: £31.5 million.

In addition, establishments will have funded locally driven drugs and alcohol initiatives, details of which are not collected centrally.

Probation Service

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his Department will continue with the second phase of the Probation Information Technology programme called Copernicus; and if he will make a statement [119333]

Mr. Boateng: Yes. Phase 2 of the Copernicus project is under way.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many probation properties have clear legal titles in England and Wales; [119330]

(2) what is the current value of the Probation Estate in England and Wales. [119328]

Mr. Boateng: The current value of the probation non-hostel estate in England and Wales is estimated to be in the region of £52 million. Further work will be undertaken to verify the legal titles of all premises used by probation services in England and Wales, and until then it is not possible to quantify property holdings that do not have clear titles.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) who he commissioned to develop a Probation Estate Transitional Strategy; what were the principal conclusions of that strategy; and if he will make a statement; [119327]

(2) what consultations he has had with probation organisations prior to the decision to accept the recommendations in the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy; and if he will make a statement; [119297]

(3) what representations he has received concerning the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy; and if he will make a statement; [119296]

(4) if he will publish the cost/benefit analysis for the options contained in the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy; and if he will make a statement; [119295]

(5) if he will publish the business case for the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy; and if he will make a statement; [119294]

(6) if he will make a statement on the implications of the Audit Commission studies of the management of the police estate and local authority estate for the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy; and if he will make a statement. [119298]

Mr. Boateng: The Probation Estate Transitional Strategy was an internal document produced by officials in the Home Office. It drew on the advice provided by a consultants' report, but was not dependent upon that report. Prior to and during the formulation of the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy, Home Office officials consulted with the principal probation management organisations, Central Probation Council (CPC) and Association of Chief Officers of Probation (ACOP), who are represented through the Probation Estate Advisory Committee. Some 10 representations concerning the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy have been received, from probation committees/boards and from the probation organisations, CPC and ACOP. Forty six probation services also responded to a request for comments on the consultants' area survey reports.

A business case and cost/benefit analysis are contained in the consultant's report which will be published in due course and a copy placed in the Library.

In 1999, the Audit Commission published "Action Stations—a management handbook on improving the management of the police estate". Management of the much smaller national probation estate presents a very different set of issues, but as much of the good practice guidance has generic application to all property management, it provides a useful reference source/guide.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what claims he expects for compensation from companies who are unsuccessful in bidding for the Case Recording and Management System for Probation Service in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [119301]

Mr. Boateng: Any procurement for Information Technology for a new case recording and management system for probation services in England and Wales will be conducted in accordance with regulations and, therefore, there would be no grounds for compensation.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will authorise a further version of the Case Recording and Management System for the Probation Service in England and Wales to take into account the changes contained in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill; and if he will make a statement. [119300]

Mr. Boateng: Work is currently under way to consider the implications of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill for Probation Service Information Technology systems.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library the assessment conducted by Amey Vecta Ltd. on the effectiveness of probation information technology in Merseyside; and if he will make a statement. [119299]

Mr. Boateng: This is an independent report commissioned by and prepared for Merseyside Probation Service. Publication is a matter for that Service.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if existing contracts to install and maintain probation information technology will be renewed; and if he will make a statement. [119430]

Mr. Boateng: The existing contracts for supply and maintenance run until the end of 2001. A new procurement will be undertaken for contracts thereafter.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to use the Private Finance Initiative in relation to the probation estate; and if he will make a statement. [119331]

Mr. Boateng: No decisions have been taken about the future financing of the probation estate in England and Wales as a whole and a range of options, including Private Finance Initiative (PFI), will be considered in due course. Local PFI initiatives are already being considered for probation services in Mid Glamorgan and Avon and Somerset.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what implications the Probation Estate Transitional Strategy has for staff levels; and if he will make a statement. [119332]

Mr. Boateng: The matter is under consideration at present. It will, however, be a matter for the new probation boards to determine their staffing needs.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the management of the Probation Estate will be the subject of external tenders in line with existing procurement rules; and if he will make a statement. [119329]

Mr. Boateng: It is proposed that management of the probation estate be carried out by a dedicated central team. However, should any external specialised property management services be procured by this management team, then these will of course follow the procurement rules then in force.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Libel Awards

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on how many occasions since 1986 the *(a)* damages and *(b)* costs awarded to a successful litigant in a libel action against a national newspaper have exceeded £499,000 in the case of *(a)* and £699,000 in the case of (b). [118909]

Jane Kennedy: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

Community Legal Service (Dartford)

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when a community legal service partnership is due to be created to cover the Dartford area. [118842]

Mr. Lock: The South Eastern Legal Services Committee will shortly be consulting on their plan for developing CLS Partnerships in the region. The plan proposes that CLS Partnerships should be rolled out in four phases. Dartford has been listed as one of the areas in the fourth phase. We hope that Dartford will form a CLS Partnership by spring 2001. If it proves possible to form a CLS Partnership in this area earlier, the Lord Chancellor will give serious consideration to supporting any such proposal.

CABINET OFFICE

Mr. Peter Wyman

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office in what *(a)* paid and *(b)* unpaid capacity Mr. Peter Wyman of PricewaterhouseCoopers has assisted Her Majesty's Government during the period 1987 to 2000. [117039]

Mr. Stringer: The names of the contract firms who carry out work for the Government would appear in official records, but the names of the officials from that firm would not necessarily be recorded. Mr. Wyman may, therefore, have carried out work for the Government on behalf of PricewaterhouseCoopers. There is no way of identifying the details without incurring disproportionate cost.

Correspondence

Mr. Watts: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will publish the latest figures showing the volume of correspondence received by Ministers and agency chief executives from hon. Members in 1999, the targets set for the replies and the replies sent within target times. [119663]

Marjorie Mowlam: The 1999 correspondence figures are set out in the table. The table also sets out comparative figures for 1998, first published on 11 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 403–05W. Members' attention is drawn to the footnotes which accompany the table and which provide general background information on how the figures are compiled.

Correspondence from MPs to Ministers and Agency Chief Executives

	1998			1999		
Department or Agency	*Target set for reply (working days)*	*Number of letters received*	*Percentage of replies within target*	*Target set for reply (working days)*	*Number of letters received*	*Percentage of replies within target*
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	15	8,058	57	15	[1]7,021	60
Cabinet Office	15	292	96	15	552	[20]85
Crown Prosecution Service	15	66	88	15	[2]30	93
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	18	3,387	86	18	5,502	90
HM Customs and Excise	18	4,439	16	18	[3]3,009	38
Ministry of Defence	15	5,619	53	15	[4]5,488	66
Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency	—	—	—	15	17	59
Army Personnel Centre	15	43	96	15	42	84
Army Training and Recruiting Agency	—	—	—	15	11	82
Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency	—	—	—	15	15	100
DERA and Defence Diversification Agency	15	42	79	15	35	89
Meteorological Office	—	—	—	15	12	83
RAF Personnel Management Agency	—	—	—	15	13	100
Department for International Development	15	2,613	91	15	2,750	93
Department for Education and Employment	15	19,766	70	15	21,196	75
Employment Service	15	630	92	15	635	98
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions	15	38,059	51	15	[5]15,768	45
Driving Standards Agency	15	108	85	15	124	68
DVLA	7	453	99	7	855	98
Highways Agency	15	480	83	15	357	79
Marine and Coastguard Agency	15	21	100	15	22	91
Planning Inspectorate	8	286	87	8	[6]204	92
Vehicle Inspectorate	15	20	100	15	18	94
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	7	10,040	85	5	[7]11,921	74
	15	9,453	47	15	[8]9,482	37
Department of Health	20	10,648	61	20	18,346	47
NHS Pensions Agency	15	42	74	15	51	84
Medicines Control Agency	10	37	73	10	70	68
Home Office	15	17,875	32	15	[9]16,826	[11]45
	20	875	52	20	[10]877	79
Fire Service College	—	—	—	7	10	100
HM Prison Service	20	2,400	69	20	2,514	73
UK Passport Agency	10	181	96	10	703	35
Inland Revenue	18	6,305	20	18	[3, 12]5,872	49
	23	193	100	23	[13]368	60
Valuation Office	23	47	36	23	24	81
Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers	15	291	80	15	[14]223	95
Lord Chancellor's Department	20	2,672	78	20	[15]2,038	82
Court Service	20	1,230	99	20	[16]898	79
HM Land Registry	20	36	100	20	[16]53	91
Public Trust Office	15	63	98	15	[16]42	95
Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments[17]	10	2,001	70	10	[17]1,897	78
Child Support Agency	10	104	87	10	[18]87	49
Compensation Agency	7	25	100	7	23	100
Environment and Heritage Service	—	—	—	10	14	100
Northern Ireland Prison Service	10	35	66	10	37	92
Planning Service	10	62	74	10	64	75
Rate Collection Agency	5	10	90	10	20	90
Rivers Agency	15	32	97	15	31	84
Road Service	10	35	97	10	26	69
Social Security Agency	10	70	93	10	116	97

Correspondence from MPs to Ministers and Agency Chief Executives

Department or Agency	1998 Target set for reply (working days)	1998 Number of letters received	1998 Percentage of replies within target	1999 Target set for reply (working days)	1999 Number of letters received	1999 Percentage of replies within target
Water Service	10	48	85	10	36	97
Office for National Statistics	10	679	88	10	[19]275	98
President of the Council's Office	15	230	88	15	151	81
The Scotland Office[20]	—	—	—	15	[20]105	72
Department of Social Security	20	19,330	31	20	16,555	66
Benefits Agency	20	2,797	56	20	2,033	70
Child Support Agency	20	8,365	100	18	5,661	98
War Pensions Agency	20	529	98	20	477	100
Department of Trade and Industry	10	22,193	50	10	[3]20,889	50
Companies House	10	38	100	10	19	100
Insolvency Service	10	19	100	10	22	86
Patent Office	—	—	—	10	[21]308	88
Radio Communications Agency	10	15	100	15	[22]39	97
HM Treasury	15	7,086	37	15	[3]5,322	44
Treasury Solicitor's Department	15	44	98	[23]10	[24]40	100
Wales Office[25]	—	—	—	15	[25]61	64

Notes on 1999 figures[27]

[1] Includes correspondence on the Intervention Board.
[2] Letters addressed to the Law Officers but subsequently replied to by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP). In addition, the DPP received 228 letters direct from MPs in 1999 of which 94 per cent. were replied to within 15 working days.
[3] Includes all Ministerial replies, not only replied to letters from MPs.
[4] Includes letters from Peers and MEPs. Also includes 387 letters where Agency Chief Executives replied on Ministers' behalf.
[5] This figure includes only correspondence received between 1 April 1999 and 31 December 1999. 1998 and 1999 figures are not directly comparable, as a new data system now provides figures relating to letters received from MPs only.
[6] Includes 49 cases relating to Wales.
[7] General correspondence (excluding correspondence on migration and visa matters).
[8] Correspondence on migration and visa matters only.
[9] 15 working days is the target for all correspondence other than correspondence on Prison Service issues.
[10] 20 working days is the target for correspondence on Prison Service issues and takes account of particular geographical circumstances. The target is the same whether replies are sent by Ministers or the Director General.
[11] The Home Office's overall performance was badly affected by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's operational difficulties. Encouragingly, the rest of the Home Office achieved 72 per cent. of replies within target.
[12] Head Office figures.
[13] Local Office and "delegated" figures (where local officials have replied direct to MPs).
[14] This figure excludes letters which were subsequently replied to by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP).
[15] Excludes letters from MPs to Ministers where Agency Chief Executives have replied on Ministers' behalf.
[16] Includes letters from MPs to Ministers where the Agency Chief Executive has replied on Ministers' behalf.
[17] Figures for Northern Ireland Departments relate to the period 1 January 1999 to 2 December 1999, the date of devolution.
[18] In addition, the Child Support Agency received 308 letters on GB cases direct from MPs in 1999 of which 49 per cent. were replied to within the 20 working day target.
[19] Includes 214 letters where the Chief Executive replied on Ministers' behalf.
[20] The Scotland Office came into existence on 1 July 1999. Figures relate to the period 1 July 1999–31 December 1999. Figures do not include interim replies.
[21] Includes 301 letters where the Chief Executive replied on Ministers' behalf.
[22] Includes 16 letters where the Chief Executive replied on Ministers' behalf.
[23] The Treasury Solicitor's Department reduced its target in May 1999 from 15 working days to 10 working days.
[24] Includes 20 letters where the Chief Executive replied on Ministers' behalf.
[25] The Wales Office came into existence on 1 July 1999. Figures relate only to the period 1 October 1999—31 December 1999.
[26] The Cabinet Office performance was badly affected by the need for wide consultation on correspondence concerning "external" issues. On issues relating to Cabinet Office domestic issues, the Cabinet Office replied to 97 per cent. of letters within target.
[27] The 1998 figures are taken from the 11 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 403–05W. Please also refer to the notes given with that reply. Departments and Agencies which received a total of between one and ten letters from MPs during 1999 are not shown in this table.

Public Sector Regulation

Mr. Watts: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she has taken to improve public sector regulation. [119662]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government are concerned about the amount of red tape and bureaucratic procedures that are affecting the delivery of public services to the citizen. I recently established a team within the Regulatory Impact Unit in the Cabinet Office to examine and review the red tape and bureaucracy that exists within the Public Sector and to recommend ways of reducing them. I asked the Public Sector Team to produce an initial report on police paperwork, in conjunction with the Government Departments with responsibility for the criminal justice system.

I am delighted to publish today their report called "Making a difference: Reducing Police Paperwork", copies of which I have placed in the Libraries of the House. The report recommends a number of deregulation measures on police paperwork, which my ministerial colleagues and I hope will free up police time, enabling them to deliver their front line services more effectively.

The Public Sector Team will continue to work towards making regulation in the criminal justice system more efficient and effective, and will, in due course, also turn their attention to regulation affecting health, schools and local authority issues.

WALES

National Lottery

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money was spent in Wales by the National Lottery on each of the sectors of activity which it supported during 1999. [118341]

Kate Hoey: I have been asked to reply.

According to the distributing bodies the amount of National Lottery money awarded to grant recipients based in Wales during 1999 was:

£

Good cause	*Amount*
The Arts	14,260,264
Charities	26,611,341
Heritage	17,767,408
Millennium projects	97,712
Sport	7,329,822
Education, Health and the Environment	632,158
Total	66,698,705

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Defence

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what recent discussions he has had with his European Union counterparts regarding *(a)* the missile threat to Europe, *(b)* the US Government preparations to pursue National Missile Defence, *(c)* US-Russian discussions on ABM treaty modifications and *(d)* continuing NATO discussions on theatre missile defence; [119169]

(2) what recent representations he has made to his European Union counterparts regarding the threat to Europe from weapons of mass destruction. [119172]

Mr. Vaz: These issues are the subject of regular discussions in NATO. European Union partners which are also members of the Alliance take part in the discussions. These issues also arise frequently in our bilateral contacts with EU partners. Proliferation issues are regularly discussed in the appropriate European Union Common Foreign and Security Policy forum.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the progress made in setting up modalities for full consultation, co-operation and transparency between the EU and NATO. [119174]

Mr. Vaz: The United Kingdom is fully involved in the continuing discussions to ensure the best means of ensuring full mutual consultation, co-operation and transparency between the EU and NATO.

The Presidency will report on progress to the European Council at Feira on 19–20 June.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what recent representations he has made to the US administration on further development of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy; [119175]

(2) what recent representations he has received from the US administration on the development of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy. [119177]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State visited Washington in February, and discussed European Defence with Mrs. Albright. The Defence Secretary discussed European Defence with his US opposite number in January. There are other frequent Ministerial and official contacts.

The US Administration remains supportive of the initiative: in recent Senate testimony, Assistant Secretary of State Marc Grossman commented that:

ESDI will be good for the Alliance, good for US interests and good for the US-European relationship.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on the progress made by the EU in setting up consultation and co-operation links between the EU and *(a)* NATO's non-EU members, *(b)* other countries who are candidates for accession to the EU and *(c)* other prospective partners in EU-led crisis management; [119178]

(2) what recent discussions the EU has had with *(a)* non-EU European NATO members and *(b)* other countries who are candidates to the EU on establishing appropriate structures for dialogue and information on issues related to security and defence policy and crisis management. [119173]

Mr. Vaz: The UK, other EU members and the Presidency have regular bilateral and multilateral discussions with the non-EU European NATO members and EU candidates on this subject.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with other Government Departments on *(a)* the missile threat to Europe and *(b)* the US Government preparations to pursue National Missile Defence. [119171]

Mr. Vaz: We are in continuous contact with all other Government Departments with an interest in these issues.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from *(a)* the Czech Republic, *(b)* Hungary and *(c)* Poland on the development of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy. [119176]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State met the Foreign Ministers of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic on 29 February. I met their deputies on 31 March-1 April. The future role of the non-EU Allies in EU crisis management operations was discussed in detail on both occasions.

Gibraltar

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date the European Court of Human Rights issued its decision on the right of the people of Gibraltar to vote in European Parliament elections; how he plans to comply with the decision of the court; and if he will make a statement. [119018]

Mr. Vaz: The judgment was given on 18 February 1999. Within a month the Government tabled an amendment to the 1976 EC Act on Direct Elections in order to extend the European franchise to Gibraltar. We have continued to press for that, and will spare no effort to secure Gibraltar's enfranchisement.

US National Missile Defence System

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from the US Administration on the US Government's preparations to pursue National Missile Defence. [119170]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South-West (Dr. Starkey) and the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 408–09W. We remain in regular dialogue with the United States Administration.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is on incorporating the Charter of Fundamental Rights into the Treaty. [119306]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 78W.

Bosnia

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many suspected war criminals have been apprehended by British forces in Bosnia. [117902]

Mr. Hain: British SFOR troops have successfully detained nine war crimes suspects indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. They have also been involved in the arrest of a further two suspects with other SFOR forces. An indictee was also shot dead by British SFOR personnel acting in self-defence during a detention operation.

International Criminal Court

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to place the ratification of the International Criminal Court on the agenda at the Copenhagen Plus Five Conference in June. [118970]

Mr. Hain: The UK regularly encourages support for the International Criminal Court (ICC) at appropriate multilateral fora. The Copenhagen Plus Five Conference will review implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action which resulted from the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, and consider further initiatives. As ratification of the ICC falls outside the issues covered at Copenhagen, it is not expected to feature on the Conference agenda.

Colombia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his US counterparts concerning financial assistance for Plan Colombia. [118973]

Mr. Battle: UK officials keep in close contact with their US counterparts on all aspects of foreign affairs, including the peace process in Colombia. During President Pastrana's visit to the UK on 13 April, we discussed ways in which the international community might assist. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs suggested the UK could take the lead in hosting an international gathering of officials and technical experts, including those from North America and Europe, to discuss the details of Plan Colombia in the next two months.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Colombian Government concerning UK assistance for *(a)* social and economic aspects of Plan Colombia and *(b)* military assistance for Plan Colombia. [118972]

Mr. Battle: We had a friendly and productive discussion with President Pastrana on 13 April about all aspects of Plan Colombia. We discussed the ways in which the international community could be of assistance, and focused in particular on the need for alternative development, the fight against drugs, and institution building.

Joint Environmental Markets Unit

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 539W, on the Joint Environmental Markets Unit, when he will implement his commitment to second staff from his Department to work for the Unit. [116069]

Mr. Hain: The joint FCO/DTI British Trade International has identified the environment sector as a priority area of its trade promotion work, and has close links with the DTI/DETR Joint Environmental Markets Unit (JEMU).

In addition, the FCO is in the process of enhancing its interchange programme with other Government departments. As part of this, we hope to institute regular secondments to JEMU in due course.

Abdullah Ocalan

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Turkish Government regarding the death sentence imposed on Abdullah Ocalan. [118831]

Mr. Vaz: I met the Turkish Foreign Minister during his visit to the UK in September 1999 and expressed our opposition to capital punishment under any circumstances. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), repeated this message to the Turkish Ambassador in December 1999. In the regular meetings between British and Turkish officials, we consistently make clear to the Turkish authorities our opposition to the death penalty as a matter of principle.

The UK also supported the statements by the EU Presidency on 29 June and 25 November 1999, which confirmed our opposition to the death penalty imposed upon Mr. Ocalan. Our general position on capital punishment was most recently restated at the EU-Turkey Association Council on 11 April by the EU Presidency.

We welcome the Turkish Government's decision in January to await the outcome of Mr. Ocalan's appeal to the ECHR before taking further action and have urged them to maintain the moratorium on capital punishment which has been in place for 15 years.

Visa Applicants (Islamabad)

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department is taking to provide shade and water for visa applicants queuing at the British High Commission in Islamabad; and if he will extend the system used in respect of visa applicants at the Deputy High Commission in Karachi to Islamabad. [118915]

Mr. Vaz: Covered accommodation for some 400 visa applicants, with drinking water and toilet facilities, is already provided inside the British High Commission at Islamabad. Similar accommodation and facilities are provided in Karachi, in a more modern building.

The land outside the compound at Islamabad belongs to the Pakistani authorities. The High Commission has repeatedly asked their permission to construct facilities which would provide shade for visa applicants. No response has been received.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British passport holders are resident in Zimbabwe; and how many other residents of Zimbabwe could claim a right of abode in the UK. [118895]

Mr. Hain: We cannot provide exact figures of the number of British passport holders resident in Zimbabwe because British nationals are not obliged to register with our High Commission in Harare. As of 12 April there are 9,000 British nationals and some 5,500 dual British/Zimbabwe nationals registered with the High Commission. Actual numbers will be higher.

Any Commonwealth citizen with a UK born parent or married to a British citizen may qualify for right of abode in the UK. For the reasons given above it is not possible to put a figure on how many residents of Zimbabwe may be eligible to claim.

Algeria

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he was first informed of the MI5 report about the involvement of the Algerian Government, or part of it, in serious human rights violations committed in Algeria. [118926]

Mr. Hain: It has been the policy of successive Governments not to comment on the operations of the security and intelligence agencies. In line with this policy the Government do not reveal what information is held by the Security Service.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Algerian Government, and when, concerning their obligations under international law to undertake full and open investigations of human rights abuses. [118927]

Mr. Hain: I raised this issue personally with the Algerian Prime Minister during my visit to Algiers on 12 April.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will ask the Algerian Government to invite the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance to visit Algeria, with particular reference to the treatment of women relatives of the disappeared in Algeria during recent demonstrations. [118937]

Mr. Hain: I welcome the recent announcement by the Algerian authorities that international NGOs, including Amnesty International, have been given dates to visit. We continue to press the Algerian government to allow access to UN experts. I raised this issue personally with the Algerian Prime Minister during my visit to Algiers on 12 April.

Iran

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs further to the oral answer to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) of 11 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 178, what steps the Government plan to take to monitor the trial and other legal proceedings in respect of the 13 members of the Jewish community from Shiraz; and if he will make a statement. [118986]

Mr. Hain: Since my answer to the House on 11 April we are concerned at reports that trial Judge has decided to hold the trial in camera, and have made our concerns known to the Iranian authorities. The pattern of developments is not entirely clear, but our Embassy is following events closely. We note that defendants have now had the opportunity to appoint their own counsel, and that all those detained have done so.

The first session of the trial took place on 13 April. We understand that the trial has been adjourned until 1 May at the request of the defence lawyers to allow them to prepare their defence. We and our EU partners will

continue to monitor events carefully. We will be paying especially close attention to defence counsel's view of proceedings.

Iraq

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from Iraqi opposition groups concerning sanctions against Iraq. [118944]

Mr. Hain: During my regular meetings with representatives of the Iraqi opposition, I receive strong support for the Government's policy on Iraq and sanctions. The Iraqi National Congress, perhaps the most significant opposition grouping outside Iraq, has made quite clear that, like us, it holds the Iraqi regime responsible for the suffering of the people, and wishes to ensure that Saddam Hussein can never again attack his own people or his neighbours with weapons of mass destruction.

Peru

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will raise the issue of alleged electoral fraud in Peru with the Peruvian Government. [118945]

Mr. Battle: The UK has played a leading role in calling for higher standards in the electoral process in Peru. We have financed two reports this year which have highlighted the deficiencies, and copies of these reports have been sent to the Peruvian Government as well as being circulated widely internationally. We were instrumental in organising a critical EU statement on 7 April in advance of the vote. On 12 April, after the vote, I issued a statement which was delivered through our Embassy in Lima to the Peruvian President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. In it I suggested a second round was both desirable and sensible in the light of widespread concerns, including that of the two British observers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) and the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross).

Since the declaration of a second round, I have issued a further statement (on 13 April) expressing the hope that the next round will be held in conditions that are free, fair and transparent. We shall be working with our EU colleagues to impress on the Peruvian authorities the need for them to conform to international standards.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of reports of alleged malpractice during the first-round ballot of the Peruvian Presidential election; and if he will make a statement. [119428]

Mr. Battle: Further to the answer I gave above to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) (UIN 118945), I remain concerned at allegations of irregularities during the Peruvian election campaign and on polling day itself on 9 April. I issued a statement on 13 April calling for the second round of voting to be held under conditions that were democratic, transparent and free from the irregularities of the first round. We shall be working with our EU colleagues to impress on the Peruvian authorities the need for them to conform to international standards in their electoral process.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his latest estimate of the number of pensioners with incomes below the minimum income guarantee who are not entitled to the minimum income guarantee because of savings in excess of the upper capital limit. [108451]

Mr. Bayley *[holding answer 4 February 2000]:* The last take-up estimates, covering 1997–98, were published in September 1999. Estimates of numbers of pensioners with incomes below the minimum income guarantee who are excluded for reasons of excess capital are not yet available.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much higher the income of *(a)* a single pensioner and *(b)* a pensioner couple not receiving income support would be in the year 2000–01 if the basic retirement pension had been uprated in (i) 1998, (ii) 1999 and (iii) 2000 in line with average earnings. [117589]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

While our priority is to target help to those pensioners in greatest need through the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG), we have provided significant help to all pensioners. During this Parliament, we will have spent nearly £1.9 billion more on Winter Fuel Payments and the MIG than on earnings uprating the basic State Pension. Clearly, given constraints on resources, if we had uprated the basic pension in line with earnings, we would not have been able to provide the level of help we have, particularly to the poorest pensioners. Also earnings uprating the basic State Pension does not help them as the increase would be offset by a pound-for-pound reduction in the MIG they received. All these aspects need to be taken into account when using figures in the table.

£.p.

Pensioner status	*Year*	*(a) Actual rate payable*	*(b) Rate payable if uprated in line with average earnings*	*((a)-(b)) Weekly difference*
Single pensioner	1998	64.70	65.00	0.30
	1999	66.75	68.20	1.45
	2000	67.50	71.25	3.75
Pensioner Couple	1998	103.40	103.90	0.50
	1999	106.70	109.00	2.30
	2000	107.90	113.90	6.00

Notes:
1. Average Earnings Index Whole Economy (Non-seasonally adjusted), as published by the Office for National Statistics.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating.

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in Dartford will benefit from the recent increase in the minimum income guarantee. [118824]

Mr. Bayley: Around 2,000 pensioners in the parliamentary constituency of Dartford are receiving their minimum income guarantee paid through Income Support, and have benefited from the recent increase in benefit rates.

SERPS

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of *(a)* 5 to 10 per cent., *(b)* 10 to 15 per cent., *(c)* 15 to 20 per cent., *(d)* 20 to 25 per cent., *(e)* 25 to 30 per cent., *(f)* 30 to 35 per cent., *(g)* 35 to 40 per cent., *(h)* 40 to 45 per cent., *(i)* 45 to 50 per cent., *(j)* 50 to 55 per cent., *(k)* 55 to 60 per cent. and *(l)* 60 to 65 per cent. of those currently in SERPS producing satisfactory evidence that they have been misled over surviving spouses' entitlement. [117538]

Mr. Rooker: The cost of any given percentage of people currently in SERPS producing satisfactory evidence that they have been misled over surviving spouses entitlement will depend on which individuals are included and how much SERPS they have accrued.

Fraud (Brentwood)

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the procedures of the Borough of Brentwood District Council in preventing and detecting fraud. [118601]

Angela Eagle: We are aware that Brentwood Borough Council is operating the Royal Mail "do not redirect" scheme, is using the Housing Benefit Matching Service and has a Remote Access Terminal installed. It has also applied to this Department for Electronic Transfer of Data which will be installed during the summer.

The authority exceeded its weekly benefit savings threshold by 82 per cent. in 1998–99 resulting in additional subsidy of around £16,000.

However, the Borough has expressed no interest in implementing the Verification Framework and we have no record that they prosecuted or referred any cases of fraud for prosecution between April 1996 and April 1999.

Housing Benefit (Brentwood)

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will make a statement on the level of co-operation between the Borough of Brentwood District Council and the Benefits Agency in relation to housing benefit; [118600]

(2) how many complaints in the last 12 months the Benefits Agency has made to the Borough of Brentwood District Council about lack of co-operation on housing benefit. [118602]

Angela Eagle: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Eric Pickles, dated 14 April 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking, if he will make a statement on the level of co-operation between the Borough of Brentwood District Council and the Benefits Agency (BA), in relation to housing benefit, and how many complaints in the last 12 months the BA has made to the Borough of Brentwood District Council about lack of co-operation on housing benefit.

The BA and Brentwood Borough Council have a joint Service Level Agreement which covers the service and performance requirements expected of both parties in connection with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Standards are measured and reviewed as necessary.

We have quarterly benefit liaison meetings to discuss any initiatives and issues that arise. Both the Local Authority and BA are satisfied with the level of co-operation.

In the last 12 months there have not been any direct complaints from the BA to Brentwood Council with regard to lack of co-operation on housing benefit.

I hope this is helpful.

Benefits (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people under the age of 65 received an Attendance Allowance in Crosby constituency in each of the years from 1994 to 1999. [118680]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The administration of Attendance Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas, dated 14 April 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking, how many people under the age of 65 received an Attendance Allowance (AA) in Crosby constituency in each of the years from 1994 to 1999.

Since the introduction of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) on 1st April 1992, persons under the age of 65 have not been able to claim AA. Customers who were under the age of 65 and in receipt of AA had their benefit converted to DLA.

Details of DLA for 1998 and 1999 are set out in the table below. Prior to 1998 figures were based on a 5% sample and the numbers for Crosby constituency are too small to be statistically reliable. Since 1998 the figures are based on a 100% sample.

Year	*DLA recipients*
1998	2,172
1999	2,158

I hope this is helpful.

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 173W, how many CT scans Medical Services has commissioned in the case of asbestos-related diseases in the past three years. [119005]

Mr. Bayley: Medical Services have commissioned no CT scans in the past three years in the case of claims for an Industrial Injuries Scheme Benefit for an asbestos-related disease.

Benefit Review Interviews

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the Department or its Agencies record whether claimants refuse to be interviewed for area benefit review interviews. [119211]

Mr. Rooker: There are no formal records for the information requested. However, the records that are available show that only a very small number of people refuse to be interviewed.

Benefit Payments

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements he will put in place to allow benefit recipients without bank accounts to be paid in cash over the counter at post offices once automated credit transfer is introduced. [119707]

Mr. Rooker: The vast majority of benefit recipients, over 80 per cent., already have access to a bank account.

The Post Office is working with banks and the Department to make a range of bank and other simple accounts available to everyone, and to make sure that getting cash from these accounts will be available to customers from local post offices.

However, we recognise that there will be some people who we will be unable to pay by automated credit transfer, and some urgent payments that cannot be made this way. For these, we are considering what alternative simple electronic money transmission system, which could also be accessed at post offices, may be commercially available.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of paying all relevant pensions, currently paid via automated credit transfer four weeks in arrears, on a weekly basis in the year the transition was made. [119422]

Mr. Rooker: There would be no overall increase in benefit expenditure in moving to weekly payments.

However, there could be a one-off cash flow effect, with expenditure up to the value of £555 million[1] being brought forward to an earlier tax year because of more frequent payments.

The Department would also incur some small additional banking costs as a result of more frequent payments.

[1] This figure assumes that all pensioners and widows, whose pensions are currently paid into a UK bank account, take up the option and that the transition was made in a single year; neither of which may necessarily be the case.

Pensioners

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much of his Department's expenditure was on people of retirement age and above; and what proportion of GDP this represented, in each year from 1992 to 2000. [118920]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* The information is in the table.

Expenditure on people over 60 as a percentage of all Social Security benefit expenditure and as a percentage of GDP

Year	Expenditure (cash £ million)	Expenditure as a percentage of: All expenditure	GDP
1991–92	31,772	47.85	5.39
1992–93	34,145	45.34	5.57
1993–94	36,443	44.21	5.63
1994–95	37,269	43.92	5.43
1995–96	38,681	43.61	5.36
1996–97	40,808	44.25	5.33

Expenditure on people over 60 as a percentage of all Social Security benefit expenditure and as a percentage of GDP

Year	Expenditure (cash £ million)	Expenditure as a percentage of: All expenditure	GDP
1997–98	42,577	45.61	5.23
1998–99	44,502	46.56	5.19
1999–2000	47,640	47.97	5.29
2000–01	49,962	49.27	5.28

Notes:

1. Expenditure figures are consistent with Table 3 of the 2000 Departmental Report (Cm4614) and earlier equivalents.

2. Social Security benefit expenditure includes non-DSS funded expenditure on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the cost of the recent research and pilot projects carried out to ascertain the reasons for pensioners not claiming Income Support and the most effective ways of promoting take-up. [118884]

Mr. Bayley: The Department carried out an extensive programme of research including surveys and qualitative work.

The cost of the research to ascertain the reasons for pensioners not claiming Income Support, and to identify possible ways to increase take-up was £325,000.

The costs of running the pilots both at District Office level and centrally were absorbed within existing work loads and no separate costs for this activity have been identified. The evaluation of the pilots, which included analysis of administrative data and a follow-up survey cost £278,063.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much his Department spent (i) directly and (ii) indirectly on asylum seekers in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998 and *(e)* 1999; and what estimate has been made of expenditure in the year 2000. [119489]

Mr. Bayley: The Home Office will be responding to this question on behalf of Government as a whole.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of extending the entitlement for new claims to Disability Living Allowance to all those aged below 70 years. [119246]

Mr. Bayley: The estimated programme cost would be £300 million in 2001–02, rising to £350 million in 2002–03 and £400 million in 2003–04.

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to conclude his review of Invalid Care Allowance. [119480]

Mr. Bayley: We are committed to keeping financial support for carers under review and we are continuing to do this. This issue is being considered in the context of the follow-up work to the National Carers' Strategy, and our response to The Royal Commission on Long Term Care, and the nature and timing of any conclusions will depend on progress on these wider activities.

Inter-Ministerial Group for Older People

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the members of the Inter-Ministerial Group for Older People; when it was established; how often it has met and when; what its terms of reference are; what subjects have been considered by it; what reports it has produced; what third parties it has consulted; and what the outcome was of those discussions. [119533]

Mr. Rooker: The Inter-Ministerial Group for Older People, established in June 1998, has met eight times on the following dates:

2 July 1998

24 March 1999

14 July 1999

27 October 1999

7 December 1999

26 January 2000

8 March 2000

11 April 2000.

The Group's terms of reference are:

to ensure that Government strategy and policy affecting older people is effectively co-ordinated, avoids duplication, and takes account of the needs of older people;

to develop a better understanding of the lives and aspirations of older people and how they are affected by Government policy; and

to co-ordinate the presentation and promotion of Government policy affecting older people.

The Group has considered a wide range of subjects including active aging, care issues, consultation and involvement, transport, volunteering and improving services for older people. A consultation document, "Building a Better Britain for Older People", was published in November 1998. The Group has also sponsored research into attitudes and aspirations of older people which was published last year[1].

The Group has consulted widely with organisations representing older people and has undertaken a significant programme of consultation with older people themselves. Members of the Group attended a series of listening to older people events across the UK during 1999, which provided older people with a further opportunity to discuss issues that are important to them. The programme will conclude with a National Listening Event on 17 May in London. This will build on and respond to the consultation that has taken place over the past year.

This extensive programme of consultation has proved valuable in helping the Inter Ministerial Group plan its work programme.

The current membership of the Group is as follows:

The Inter-Ministerial Group for Older People

Right hon. Jeff Rooker MP (Chair): Minister of State, Department of Social Security

Right hon. Paul Boateng MP: Minister of State, Home Office

David Hanson MP: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Welsh Office

Keith Hill MP: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

Margaret Hodge MP: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Education and Employment

Alan Howarth MP: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport

George Howarth MP: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Northern Ireland Office

Dr. Kim Howells MP: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Trade and Industry

John Hutton MP: Minister of State, Department of Health

Right hon. Baroness Jay of Paddington: Minister for Women

Melanie Johnson MP: Economic Secretary, Her Majesty's Treasury

Jane Kennedy MP: Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department

Lewis Moonie MP: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence

Right hon. Ian McCartney MP: Minister of State, Cabinet Office

Nick Raynsford MP: Minister of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

Brian Wilson MP: Minister of State, Scotland Office

The Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Executive also have responsibilities for policies that affect older people. The Inter-Ministerial group is therefore working closely with Jane Hutt and Iain Gray, both of whom have attended meetings.

Note:

1. Attitudes and Aspirations of Older People—a review of the literature by Annette Boaz, Carol Hayden and Miriam Bernard, was published on 18 October 1999 in the Department of Social Security's Research Report Series (Report No. 101, ISBN 1 84123 144 4).

Attitudes and Aspirations of Older People—a qualitative study by Carol Hayden, Annette Boaz and Francesca Taylor was published on 18 October 1999 in the Department of Social Security's Research Report Series (Report No. 102, ISBN 1 84123 158 4).

ONE Pilot Areas

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what period of time has been devoted to training start-up officers and personal advisers in the ONE pilot areas to enable them to identify entitlement to income support, housing benefit, disability living allowance and incapacity benefit; and what period of time has been devoted to training to enable them to identify entitlement to working families tax credit and disabled persons' tax credit; [119338]

(2) what training advisers in the ONE pilot areas have received in understanding and applying the principle of good cause. [119343]

Angela Eagle: ONE training for all advisers is individually tailored through the use of the learning assessment framework which matches training provision to training need. A copy of this framework can be found in the Library.

There is extensive benefits training available to advisers on the entitlement to ONE benefits. Advisers receive a three-week benefit entitlement training course, which includes Income Support, Housing Benefit, Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Persons Tax Credit.

Advisers also receive training in relation to good cause. However, it should be noted that most already understand and know how to apply the principles of good cause. Good cause provisions exist elsewhere in the benefit system and were, for example, included in the training for the New Decision Making and Appeals procedures which were implemented in the Autumn of 1999.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 18 April 2000

CABINET OFFICE

Regulatory Reform Bill

Kali Mountford: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made with the proposed Regulatory Reform Bill. [119824]

Mr. Stringer: The Regulatory Reform Bill has today been published in draft, in order to allow the two Parliamentary Deregulation Committees to report on it prior to its formal introduction to Parliament. The House of Commons Deregulation Committee and its counterpart in the House of Lords have great expertise on the existing deregulation order-making power under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. Their views on the proposed extension of this power will clearly be of great interest to the House when it comes to consider the Bill. 'Publication of the draft Regulatory Reform Bill' (Cm 4713) contains the draft Bill, Explanatory Notes and other supporting material, and I have placed copies in the Libraries of the House, the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

In addition to the changes to the deregulation order-making power, the draft Bill includes provisions to replace section 5 of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, which deals with enforcement of regulations. This policy was the subject of a public consultation exercise in Autumn 1999. The majority of those responding to the consultation document were supportive of the Government's proposals. I am today placing copies of the Government's response to that consultation exercise in the Libraries of the House, the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office. Copies of the Government's response to the earlier consultation exercise on the proposed changes to the deregulation order-making power, published in September 1999, are already in the Libraries.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of properties in her charge are empty; and what steps are being taken by her Department to reduce the number of such properties. [116909]

Mr. Stringer: The Cabinet Office had 168 properties in its charge on 1 April 1999, of which 30.4 per cent. were empty on 1 April 2000. The majority of the empty properties were office buildings held by the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE), a key responsibility of which has been to dispose of surplus occupied and empty office accommodation on the Government Estate. In many cases tenants have been found for previously empty properties to reduce the burden on the Exchequer and to make them more attractive for disposal to investors. The principal determinant for disposal is value for money to the Exchequer. PACE and another two of the Cabinet Office's agencies transferred to HM Treasury on 1 April 2000. The figures include three office buildings on the Cabinet Office estate undergoing refurbishment.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Gibraltar

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the result of the Government's latest discussions with the Spanish Government on the subject of Gibraltar. [117396]

Mr. Vaz: Discussions between Spain and the United Kingdom, in consultation with the Government of Gibraltar, to overcome difficulties which have arisen on a number of issues within the European Union concerning Gibraltar have been continuing for several months. I hope that it will be possible to bring them to a successful conclusion.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to consult the Gibraltar Government before making decisions on matters affecting the people of Gibraltar. [119610]

Mr. Vaz: We regularly consult the Government of Gibraltar on a wide range of matters affecting the people of Gibraltar. We do this routinely via the office of the Governor of Gibraltar and through meetings with Ministers and officials when the Chief Minister is in London.

Works of Art

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been spent on *(a)* the upkeep and *(b)* the purchase of works of art in his Department for each financial year since 1992. [117481]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister for the Arts, 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 392–93W.

Most of the works of art on display in our missions abroad are on loan from the Government Art Collection. Some are purchased, as part of large capital projects, such as new Embassies. A comprehensive breakdown of expenditure on artwork purchased could be provided only at disproportionate cost as it has been recorded only as part of the overall capital project cost.

We have no readily available information on the years prior to 1994. The best figures we have for the years 1994–95 to 1998–99 indicate that under £1 million was spent on artwork over that period, less than 0.5 per cent. of the overall programme of capital expenditure on the estate of £215.7 million for the same period.

Upkeep costs are low, and not separately recorded. Expenditure on artworks will be separately identified in future under Resource Accounting and Budgeting.

General Affairs Council, Luxembourg

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the outcome was of the General Affairs Council held in Luxembourg on 10 and 11 April; and if he will make a statement. [118898]

Mr. Vaz: The information is as follows:

1. The General Affairs Council (GAC) in Luxembourg on 10 April adopted the A points listed in document No. 7592/00 and noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its session of 13–17 March in Strasbourg listed in document No. 6496/00. Copies of these documents will be placed in the House Libraries as soon as they become available.

Council Formations

2. The GAC reached agreement on a reduction in the number of Council Formations to 16 (General Affairs; Agriculture; Economic and Financial Affairs; Environment; Transport and Telecommunications; Employment and Social Policy; Fisheries; Industry and Energy; Justice, Home Affairs and Civil Protection; Internal Market, Consumer Affairs and Tourism; Research; Budget; Culture; Development; Education and Youth Affairs; and Health); and agreed to review this decision in 2002.

Lisbon Follow-up

3. The GAC heard a report from the President of the European Commission on the planned extensive follow-up to the Lisbon Special Council. The Presidency noted that it would also issue plans for follow-up. The GAC agreed that the Feira Council should adopt an e-Europe action plan, a small business charter, and plans for benchmarking the performance of EU economies.

Conflict in Africa

4. EU presidency Representative Senator Serri briefed the GAC on the negotiations in the Eritrea/Ethiopia Peace Process. The GAC expressed its deep concern at the humanitarian situation in the region and reaffirmed its strong support for the efforts of the OAU Presidency to end the conflict. It expressed concern at the level of arms sales to the region.

5. The Commission briefed the GAC on the EU response to requests for humanitarian assistance. The GAC emphasised the need for a co-ordinated approach with the UN to ensure the efficient and speedy delivery of international aid. The GAC called on Ethiopia and Eritrea to facilitate such deliveries and to ensure the security of food and humanitarian assistance.

Zimbabwe

6. The GAC discussed the situation in Zimbabwe. Member states underlined their concern at the farm invasions and appealed to the Government of Zimbabwe to enforce law and order. The GAC also urged the Government of Zimbabwe to create the conditions for the holding of free and fair elections. Under such conditions, the Council agreed that the EU would be willing to support and monitor the elections provided a request for such support was made by the Government of Zimbabwe.

China/WTO

7. The GAC gave its full support to Commissioner Lamy's approach to the latest round of bilateral negotiations on China's accession to the WTO. The GAC noted that the EU had already shown flexibility in its few remaining requests, and that a similar attitude from China would pave the way for an agreement.

IGC

8. Foreign Ministers reviewed progress to date in the Government Representatives group and considered prospects for the second half of the Portuguese Presidency. Discussion focused on a Presidency paper on the extension of qualified majority voting.

Burma

9. In renewing its Common Position on Burma for another six months, the GAC agreed to the most substantial strengthening of the measures against the Burmese regime since the Common Position was first adopted in 1996. It will now incorporate a published list of those regime members and supporters subject to visa restrictions; a freeze on their funds held abroad; and a ban on the supply of equipment which could be used for internal repression or terrorism.

10. The Council also agreed to send a second Troika mission to Rangoon to promote the EU's policy towards Burma; to consider the possibilities for increased humanitarian aid; to resume EU-ASEAN ministerial dialogue, in Asia, later in the year.

Turkey

11. The GAC agreed a Common Position for the following day's EC/Turkey Association Council and three-year funding regulation for Turkey worth 15 meuro.

12. The Association Council agreed to start negotiations on the liberalisation of services and mutual opening of procurement markets. It also agreed to set up eight sectoral sub-committees of the Association Committee to promote harmonisation of Turkey's legislation with the EU acquis.

Russia

13. The GAC again deplored the suffering of the civilian population in Chechnya. It noted the recent decision by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to suspend the voting rights of the Russian Delegation and its recommendation to the Council of Ministers to move towards suspension of Russia's membership of the Council of Europe. The GAC observed that this reflected the deep concern of European public opinion about the continuing conflict in Chechnya. The GAC expressed its support for the Council of Europe's continuing co-operation with, and assistance to, Russia, provided Russia abides by its commitments. At the same time, the GAC acknowledged Russian co-operation in establishing a Council of Europe presence in the region and in agreeing to make public a report on Chechnya prepared by the Council of European Committee for the Prevention of Torture.

14. The GAC supported the call by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for Russia to establish, according to international standards, a national broad-based and independent commission of inquiry into allegations of human rights violations.

UNCHR/China

15. The GAC discussed its approach to China at the current session of the UN Commission on Human Rights. It decided that EU member states would not co-sponsor the US resolution in China, but would oppose any "no-action motion" tabled by China.

Western Balkans

16. The GAC welcomed the intention of Secretary General/High Representative Solana and Commissioner Patten to visit the Balkans more frequently, following the mandate from the Lisbon European Council. It welcomed their intention to advance the dialogue with Serbian civil society and to make further proposals on trade and assistance, notably for Montenegro.

17. The GAC heard a presentation by the EU Special Representative for the Stability Pact on the successful outcome of the regional funding conference.

18. The GAC noted the holding of municipal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 8 April. The GAC urged the relevant authorities to implement the election results speedily as a contribution to the full implementation of the Dayton and Paris Agreements and the New York Declaration.

19. The GAC welcomed the decision by the Serb National Council to appoint representatives to the Interim Administrative Council and the Transitional Council of Kosovo.

20. The GAC underlined the importance it attached to a strong coherent effort by the EU, the US and the Russian Federation on the Western Balkans.

AOB: IRELA (Europe/Latin America Institute)

21. The GAC discussed the funding of IRELA. Ministers urged the Commission to resolve its problems over the financial management of IRELA. The Commission indicated that results of an audit of IRELA's finances for 1997 had led to the recovery of 1 million euro and an audit for 1998 would be available in the autumn.

Job Losses

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 407W, on employment in Grimsby, if he will set out the methodology used in the calculation of aggregate job losses for all constituencies in the United Kingdom. [118867]

Mr. Vaz: Britain in Europe commissioned this survey from South Bank University. My hon. Friend should approach the organisations concerned for details of their research methodology.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the percentage change compared to 1990–91 in his Department's energy efficiency in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [118988]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the then Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 580–84W, which reported progress for all central Government Departments by 31 March 1998. We hope that results for the period up to March 1999 will be published shortly.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his Department's energy efficiency performance target, expressed as a percentage change in comparison to 1990–91, for each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [118989]

Mr. Hain: The FCO's energy efficiency performance target from April 2000 is the target set across the Government estate of an annual 1 per cent. reduction in greenhouse gas emissions against 1999–2000 levels.

Middle East

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of the construction of the planned bypass roads in the West Bank on the future economic viability of a Palestinian state. [118949]

Mr. Hain: Territory, and other issues which may have an impact on the viability of any future Palestinian state, should be determined in negotiation between the two parties, rather than predetermined by the unilateral acts of either.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Israeli Government in response to their announcement of the re-activation of the building programme of bypass roads in the West Bank. [118985]

Mr. Hain: We consider all settlement activity in the West Bank to be illegal and unhelpful to the peace process. We frequently make this view clear to the Israeli Government, and will continue to do so.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what safeguards are included in the second phase of the European Union's assistance programme to the Palestinian Authority in support of counter-terrorism to ensure that human rights are protected. [118968]

Mr. Battle: EU member states recognise the importance of human rights in their Counter-Terrorism Assistance Programme with the Palestinian Authority. Under Phase I of the programme, there was a dedicated human rights project run by the Wallenberg Institute of Sweden. This will continue under Phase II, although the EU member state(s) has/have not yet been chosen.

The UK, along with all EU member states, regards human rights as an important and integral part of the programme and takes every opportunity to convey this message to the Palestinian Authority. Human rights aspects of all projects under the programme are carefully monitored.

Geneva Conventions 1949

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have accepted the competence, without special agreement, of the International Fact-Finding Commission authorised under Article 90 of Additional Protocol I of 1977 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. [119476]

Mr. Hain: The following countries have accepted the competence of the International Fact-Finding Commission in accordance with the provisions of Article 90 of Additional Protocol I:

Algeria
Argentina
Australia
Austria
Belgium
Bolivia
Bosnia-Herzegovina
Brazil
Bulgaria
Belarus
Canada
Cape Verde
Chile
Colombia
Costa Rica
Croatia
Czech Republic
Denmark
Finland
Germany
Greece
Guinea
Hungary
Iceland
Ireland
Italy
Laos
Liechenstein
Luxembourg
Macedonia
Madagascar
Malta
Mongolia
Namibia
Netherlands
New Zealand
Norway
Panama
Paraguay
Poland
Portugal
Qatar
Romania
Russia
Rwanda
Seychelles
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
Tajikistan
Togo
Ukraine
United Arab Emirates
United Kingdom; and
Uruguay.

Ministerial Visits (Turkey and Malta)

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* Turkish and *(b)* Maltese Ministers are scheduled to visit the UK during the next 12 months; when the visits will take place; and if he will make a statement. [119290]

Mr. Vaz: We expect our close relations with both Turkey and Malta to be supplemented by visits to the UK from Turkish and Maltese Ministers over the next 12 months. However, at present, no dates have been fixed for any visits.

A number of senior Turkish Ministers have recently visited the UK. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Defence Minister, Minister for Agriculture and Minister for Privatisation visited in 1999; the Labour and Social Security Minister and the Interior Minister have already visited this year.

Both the Maltese Foreign Minister and Finance Minister visited the UK in 1999.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what ministerial visits are being planned to Turkey and Malta over the next 12 months; for what purposes; and if he will make a statement. [119291]

Mr. Vaz: We expect our close relations with both Turkey and Malta to be supplemented by visits from UK Ministers over the next 12 months. I hope to visit both countries during the next 12 months.

A number of British Ministers have recently visited Turkey. My hon. Friend the Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), formerly the Minister for Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), formerly the Minister for the Armed Forces, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), formerly Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, visited in 1999.

In the same capacity, my right hon. Friend also visited Malta in 1999.

Entry Waiting Times (Sub-continent)

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the waiting times in each queue for entry to the United Kingdom in *(a)* Bombay, *(b)* New Delhi, *(c)* Islamabad and *(d)* Dhaka; and by how much each has *(a)* increased and *(b)* decreased in the last 12 months. [119243]

Mr. Vaz: The statistics requested are as follows:

	Days	*Weeks*			
	Tier 3	*Q1*	*Q2*	*Q3*	*Q4*
Bombay					
31 March 2000	0	0	6	6	6
31 March 1999	0	0	8	8	8
Islamabad					
31 March 2000	6	9	26.5	35.5	42
31 March 1999	17	12	33	36	40

	Days	Weeks			
	Tier 3	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Dhaka					
31 March 2000	6	14	26	15	40
31 March 1999	2	12	18	11	37
New Delhi					
31 March 2000	0	0	8	8	8
31 March 1999	0	0	14	22	28

Notes:
Tier 3: Non-settlement (visit) applications
Q1-Q4: Settlement applications
Q1: Right of Abode cases and Dependent Relatives over 65
Q2: Spouses and children under 18
Q3: Fiance(e)s and other First Time Applicants
Q4: Re-applicants

Chechnya

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 30 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 267W, if he will ensure that United Kingdom and Russian efforts to work together to combat terrorism do not include assistance for the activities of the Russian security forces in Chechnya. [119591]

Mr. Vaz: Yes.

Terrorism

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received concerning the proposed *(a)* International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and *(b)* International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings; what plans he has to seek the views of the Northern Ireland Commission on Human Rights; and what plans he has made to open the consultation process concerning the conventions to non-governmental organisations. [118974]

Mr. Battle: We have received no recent representations concerning these Conventions, both of which the UK signed on the day they were opened for signature in January 2000 and January 1998 respectively.

The Government have no plans to seek the views of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission or re-open a consultation process to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at this stage. The Terrorism Bill, which provides the vehicle for the implementation of both these conventions in UK domestic law, was subject to a long and comprehensive consultation process which included the views of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and all interested NGOs. The Government have stated their intention to ratify both these Conventions. If organisations would like to comment on any aspect of the ratification process they are welcome to do so.

European Court of Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those cases against the United Kingdom that have been lodged and are awaiting consideration by the European Court of Human Rights, indicating *(a)* which Articles of the Convention are cited as having been breached in the application and *(b)* those cases which have been ruled admissible. [118975]

Mr. Hain: In 1999, 429 applications involving the United Kingdom were registered before the European Court of Human Rights. Of these, 32 have been declared admissible. To list the situation regarding each of these cases would be too detailed for the *Official Report*. I shall write to my hon. Friend with further details and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how long it took to process each stage in each case brought against the United Kingdom in the last four years before the European Court of Human Rights; and what estimate he has made of when it will be possible to form an assessment of the impact of structural changes to the European Court mechanisms upon the length of proceedings. [118976]

Mr. Hain: Several hundred cases involving the United Kingdom have been brought before the European Court of Human Rights in the last four years. It would not be feasible to list how long each stage of the proceedings took in each of these cases. The procedure for each case is determined individually by the Court taking into account the particular facts and circumstances of the case. A proper assessment of the impact of the new procedures in Strasbourg will not be possible until a sufficient number of cases have been determined exclusively by the new Court. The European Commission on Human Rights ceased to consider cases only on 31 October 1999. It is still too early, therefore, to attempt such an assessment.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal (Disabled People)

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people on Incapacity Benefit have, under the personal adviser section of the New Deal for the Disabled, *(a)* been contacted by a Personal Adviser, *(b)* attended an initial interview, *(c)* had a complete employability assessment, *(d)* had an agreed individual action plan, *(e)* found part-time employment as a result of the programme and *(f)* found full-time employment as a result of the programme. [118611]

Ms Hodge: We have been piloting the New Deal for Disabled People since autumn 1998. The latest available figures are those for the period up to 25 February 2000 covering the 12 personal adviser pilot areas.

10,070 people have contacted and met a Personal Adviser to discuss their employment prospects. Some 6,650 people have developed an employment-focused action plan following a full assessment of their employment prospects.

Our experience shows that for many in the client group the journey back to work will be lengthy. I am pleased therefore to be able to say that some 1,843 people had found work, representing 56 per cent. of those who had completed their action plans. Of these 1,081 were in full-time work and 551 in part-time work. A further 211 had become self-employed, entered supported employment or had been helped to retain their current jobs.

In addition, 607 people had started work as a result of participating in innovative schemes.

Value-added League Tables

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to publish the research by Professor Jenson of York University into value-added league tables. [119253]

Jacqui Smith: The publication of research is a matter for the author.

Special Schools

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list those LEAs which make specific provision for special schools for voice output communication aids for children with speech problems; how many aids are supplied in each LEA *(a)* at present and *(b)* in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [119225]

(2) if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the provision of voice output communication aids in special schools for children with learning disabilities and lack of verbal communication skills; and what his policy is in respect of allowing the use of such aids at home. [119229]

Jacqui Smith: Information on specific provision that local education authorities (LEAs) make to special schools in relation to communication aids is not collected centrally.

The Education Act 1996, associated regulations, and guidance in the 'Code of Practice on the identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs' places a statutory duty on LEAs to identify and assess children with special educational needs (SEN) for whom they are responsible. Where this leads to the issuing of a statement of SEN, the LEA has to ensure the child receives the special educational provision identified in the statement and the support required to ensure this provision fully meets the needs of the child. In cases where provision includes the use of communication aids many LEAs allow children to take such equipment home where it is appropriate, and we fully support that course of action.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what steps his Department is taking to evaluate and analyse the benefits of voice output communication aids for children with communication difficulties in special schools; and if he will make a statement; [119226]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to help special schools and LEAs to improve the provision of communication aids for children with speech and communication problems. [119228]

Jacqui Smith: The Department is not, at present, undertaking any evaluation or analysis of the benefits of voice output communication aids for children with communication difficulties in special schools.

Local education authorities (LEAs) are responsible for identifying and making a statutory assessment of children with special educational needs (SEN) for whom they are responsible. Where this leads to the issuing of a statement of SEN, the LEA has a duty to ensure the child receives the special educational provision identified in the statement and the support required to ensure this provision fully meets the needs of the child. This includes support required by children with communication difficulties. We would expect LEAs to monitor and evaluate locally the provision and support they make available to meet fully children's SEN.

The Department supports, through the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta), two national assessment centres for pupils with communication difficulties.

These centres provide specialist assessments to identify where technology, in particular communication aids and computers with assistive technology, (such as speech output, switch and keyboard alternatives), can provide access to the curriculum. They provide a focus of information and experience that can be accessed by anyone who has an involvement with children who have communication difficulties, including special schools.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received from local education authorities requesting central government ring-fenced financing for voice output communication aids, in special schools for pupils with communication difficulties; and if he will make a statement. [119227]

Jacqui Smith: There have been no representations from local education authorities (LEAs) requesting central government ring-fenced financing for voice output communication aids for pupils in special schools with communication difficulties.

Recycling

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his policy on the recycling of materials produced by his Department. [107858]

Mr. Wills: The Department's policy is in line with the Government-wide waste minimisation strategy which promotes reduction, re-use and recovery through recycling. All of the Department's buildings have recycling schemes in place for paper, toner cartridges and fluorescent tubes. We also recycle computer equipment to schools.

Capital Modernisation Fund

Mr. Benton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what further plans he has for using Capital Modernisation Fund allocations in schools. [119722]

Jacqui Smith: We are pleased to announce that £60 million is being allocated from the Capital Modernisation Fund to tackle deficiencies in secondary school science over the next two years. The initiative will do this by funding the construction of imaginative and effective 21st century laboratories at those schools most in need.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Commission for Racial Equality

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will announce further appointments to the Commission for Racial Equality. [119912]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am pleased to announce that I have appointed Beverley Bernard as Deputy Chair for the Commission for Racial Equality. The appointment is initially for three years on a part-time basis.

Community Safety and Partnership Report

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the report by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary on Community Safety and Partnership. [119913]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Yes. I have today placed in the Library a note of the recommendations from the report, together with the Commissioner's responses and the police authority responses, which take into account the advice that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I have received from the Metropolitan Police Committee.

Motorcycle Theft

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what motorcycle theft reduction targets he has recently set. [119602]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No targets have been set specifically for the reduction of motorcycle theft. Motorcycle theft, which is estimated to account for about 6 per cent. of all thefts of vehicles, is included within the national target to reduce vehicle crime by 30 per cent. by 2004.

Terrorism

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to seek external legal advice on the definitions of terrorism and terrorist act in proposed *(a)* domestic legislation and *(b)* the International Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. [118977]

Mr. Straw: In developing proposals for the definition of terrorism and a terrorist act in the Terrorism Bill, the Government took account of the responses to its consultation paper "Legislation Against Terrorism", including those which provided legal advice. Since the introduction of the Terrorism Bill, the Government have received a number of submissions from bodies on the definition, including some which specifically provided legal advice on the matter. These have been carefully considered.

The Government have no plans to seek further legal advice on the terms of the International Convention on the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism or the International Convention on the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings.

European Committee for the Prevention of Torture

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which organisations he has consulted concerning his proposed response to the 29 March 1998 communication from the President of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture; if he will place a copy of the response in the Library; and what is the reason for the delay in responding to this communication. [118978]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Outside Government, we have consulted the Metropolitan police, the Crown Prosecution Service, and the Government of the Isle of Man.

The Government responded to the communication to which the Question refers on 16 October 1998. Delays in publication of the report are largely due to what appears to be a bureaucratic oversight by the Committee and then to its initial unwillingness to remove passages subject to legal professional privilege. It was published on 13 January 2000.

We hope to send the Government's response to the Committee on 19 April, and that the Committee will publish it within two or three weeks. This delay has enabled us to respond more fully to the Committee's recommendations in the context of the Government's consideration of an independent police complaints system. I will place a copy of the response in the Library when it has been published.

Fires

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deaths from fire there were in *(a)* residential and *(b)* non-residential property where a sprinkler system was fitted in each of the last 10 years. [119110]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is given in the table.

Number of deaths from fire in dwellings [1] and non-residential properties where a sprinkler system [2] was fitted, 1988–98, United Kingdom

Year	Dwellings	Non-residential properties
1989	—	3
1990	—	—
1991	—	—
1992	—	2
1993	—	—
1994	—	2
1995	—	—
1996	—	—
1997	—	—
1998[3]	—	—

[1] Includes caravans, boats and other non-building structures used solely as a permanent dwelling

[2] Includes drencher systems from 1988 to 1993

[3] Provisional

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deaths from fire in residential property there were where a freestanding smoke detector was *(a)* fitted and working and *(b)* fitted but not working in each of the last 10 years. [119111]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information for 1994 to 1998 only is given in the table. Figures for smoke alarm operation were not collected nationally for years prior to

1994. The table has been split to show both numbers of deaths from fire where a smoke alarm was present, operated and raised the alarm, and deaths where smoke alarms were present, operated, but did not raise the alarm (ie although the alarm sounded the fire brigade was not called).

Number of deaths from fire in dwellings [1] by presence and operation of smoke detectors, United Kingdom, 1994 [2]–98 [4]

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998 [4]*
Smoke alarm presence and operation:					
Present, operated and raised alarm	47	58	57	45	48
Present, operated, but did not raise alarm[3]	35	28	26	27	28
Smoke alarm present but did not operate	46	71	82	84	80
Smoke alarm present (all)	128	157	165	156	156
Smoke alarm absent	360	389	399	406	350
Unspecified	—	13	—	—	—
Total	488	559	564	562	[5]506(496)

[1] Includes caravans, boats and other non-building structures used solely as a permanent dwelling.
[2] Prior to 1994 data was not collected.
[3] Category includes instances where alarm was raised by people before smoke alarm operated; no-one was in earshot; alarm incorrectly installed etc.
[4] Figures for 1998 are provisional.
[5] Figures for 1998 are estimated to take account of revisions as later information is received.

Police Vehicle Accidents

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent arrangements he has made to ensure that emergency services adopt safe driving procedures. [119207]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This is an operational matter for the police service, the ambulance service and the fire service. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) reviewed training arrangements in their Police Pursuit Driving Training report of September 1998. The report has been accepted in principle by all of the 43 police forces in England and Wales and its recommendations are being taken forward on a national basis.

Under the Fire Services Act 1947, it is the duty of each fire authority to provide the efficient training of the members of the fire brigade taking account of Home Office guidance and local circumstances.

I understand that drivers of emergency ambulances are required to undertake a two-week practical and theoretical training course. This arrangement has been in place since the 1970s and driving standards are assessed by specially trained driving instructors.

Female Circumcision

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what training is given to *(a)* police officers and *(b)* other law enforcement groups for the policing of the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985. [119187]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The training of police officers is ultimately the responsibility of individual chief constables who have discretion to provide training on any subject for which there is a local need.

We are not aware of any other law enforcement groups which might be involved in policing the Act.

Sentencing

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures the Government will put in place to respond to the findings of the Sentencing Advisory Panel on fairness and consistency in sentencing for environmental offences. [119209]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The role of the Sentencing Advisory Panel is to provide views to the Court of Appeal on particular offences or categories of offence to assist the Court in framing or revising guidelines. The Court of Appeal has discretion as to how it chooses to use those views. It would not be appropriate for the Government to interfere in this.

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action the Government will take to implement the Sentencing Advisory Panel's recommendations that a higher level of compensation than £5,000 for environmental offences should be allowed in magistrates courts. [119191]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 21 January 2000, the Chairman of the Sentencing Advisory Panel wrote to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary suggesting an increase in the level of compensation available in magistrates courts for environmental offences. The Government are currently considering how to respond.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119439]

Mr. Straw: The Cabinet Office will shortly be publishing the spring 2000 report summarising progress towards the delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005. We are currently collecting data to contribute to that report. This will include our progress

towards delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. We currently provide a range of services electronically which include the following:

a 24 hour, seven day a week call centre within the United Kingdom Passport Agency, established in January this year, which is able to give members of the public responses to a wide range of inquiries, including progress of their passport applications;

the online provision of Home Office research and statistical publications. This includes the Digest of Criminal Justice Statistics, enabling criminal justice practitioners, academics and other members of the public to carry out their own analysis of criminal justice statistics; and

a comprehensive online information service, provided by the Home Office website, for all aspects of my Department's work.

Extradition Powers

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what powers he has to seek the extradition of persons suspected of murdering British citizens abroad. [119289]

Mr. Straw: I have no powers to seek the return of persons suspected of murdering British subjects abroad unless the suspect is also a British subject. Under section 9 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, the extraterritorial jurisdiction of courts in England and Wales extends only to cases where a British subject is accused of committing murder or manslaughter abroad and not to those where the victim is a British subject.

Dr. Harold Shipman

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if inquests will be held into the deaths of the 23 further alleged victims of Dr. Harold Shipman in connection with which the Director of Public Prosecutions has decided he should not be charged. [119723]

Mr. Straw: I understand that the relevant coroner is considering whether inquests ought to be held. Since the bodies have all been cremated in these cases, the coroner cannot proceed without my authority. If such consent is sought, I will consider very carefully whether inquests are desirable and whether to direct the coroner accordingly.

Fire Service

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received the recommendations of the inquiry into the machinery for determining firefighters' conditions of service. [119127]

Mr. Straw *[pursuant to his reply, 12 April 2000, c. 226W]:* The word "employees" was inadvertently substituted for the word "employers" in the first paragraph. The final sentence of the first paragraph should, therefore, have read:

These include proposals which would involve the acceptance by the employers and the union of conciliation and arbitration, in the event of disputes, a clarification of procedures, a streamlining of the negotiation arrangements, and an independent Chair for the National Joint Council.

PRIME MINISTER

Synchrotron

Mr. Field: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the dates on which meetings were held between Her Majesty's Government and the French Government on the Synchrotron project; and if he will make a statement on the nature of the French Government's representations on the siting of the Synchrotron. [117103]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* I am advised that officials from the UK Government and the French Government met on 15 September 1999, 4 November 1999 and 13 December 1999 to discuss the new synchrotron project. On 14 October 1999 my noble Friend the Minister for Science had a private discussion with the French Minister for Research and Education who stated that it would be more acceptable for the French if the synchrotron were to be located at the Rutherford Laboratory. My noble Friend had a further conversation with the French Minister on 9 March 2000, during which the French Minister said they would withdraw their support from the synchrotron project if the Wellcome Trust withdrew.

Both partners expressed the view that the favoured the Rutherford site. The French Education Ministry state publicly that

This site was strongly supported by the French partners in the project and we are delighted with this choice.

The Wellcome Trust stated that they would withdraw from the partnership if the decision was taken to locate the project at Daresbury.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Field: To ask the Prime Minister when he will reply to the question tabled on 28 March by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead on Government meetings in connection with the relocation of the synchrotron (reference 117103). [119693]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

Personal Envoys

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make it his policy to ensure that all persons carrying out duties abroad on his behalf can be questioned in Parliament. [118425]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 12 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 180W.

Pig Farmers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received from pig farmers on the compensation sought for the BSE-equivalent costs. [119448]

The Prime Minister: I have received a number of representations. But, as has been made clear by Agriculture Commissioner Fischler, payment of aid to pig producers linked to BSE is not possible under EU state aid rules. Helping the industry to meet the challenges it

faces is the way forward and this is the prime objective of the Pig Industry Aid Scheme I announced at my meeting with industry leaders on 30 March 2000.

Correspondence

Mr. Norman: To ask the Prime Minister if he will reply to the letters of 5 and 13 April from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells. [119682]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 390W.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Accumulated Service Medals

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what procedure was followed by the Honours and Distinction Committee to ascertain the eligibility of members of the Royal Irish Regiment claiming accumulated service medals, but for whom the necessary records were not available. [119344]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

The Royal Warrant for the Accumulated Campaign Service Medal specifies that the award to Royal Irish Regiment personnel is dependent upon completion of 1,080 operational duties for full-time members, and 1,000 operational duties for part-time members. In the absence of contemporary local records, the Ministry of Defence has introduced a protocol to assist applicants in providing evidence of their operational service. Dedicated teams have been established to help applicants with their cases and each applicant is allocated his/her own case officer. As the qualifying criteria for the medal remain unchanged, there has been no need for my Department to consult the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals (known as the HD Committee).

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Action 2000

51. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she has made of the work of Action 2000 and the Government's Year 2000 programme. [118177]

Mrs. Beckett: The Government's year 2000 programme has been an outstanding success, with the UK almost untouched by the Bug. This is due to the hard work of many across the public and private sectors who worked in partnership with Government and Action 2000.

The work done has also delivered far-reaching benefits. These are drawn out in a Command Paper entitled "Modernising Government in Action: Realising the Benefits of Y2K" that I am publishing today. The Paper explains how the lessons and benefits of tackling the Bug are being captured across government.

56. **Mr. White:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she has made of the work of Action 2000 in tackling the year 2000 problem. [118182]

Mrs. Beckett: Action 2000's contribution in helping to tackle the Millennium Bug has been significant. The National Infrastructure Forum (NIF) alone was a remarkable achievement. The links which were forged in the NIF, and the work done to map the key processes of the national infrastructure, will be of lasting benefit.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Modernisation

50. **Kali Mountford:** To ask the President of the Council how many recommendations have been made by the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons; and how many have been implemented. [118176]

Mrs. Beckett: The Modernisation Committee reported at the beginning of this Session that of the 56 recommendations we have made, 47 have been approved by the House and implemented either in whole or in part. Since then, another one has been implemented by the use of a second Reading Committee for the Royal Parks (Trading) Bill.

53. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the President of the Council if she will bring forward proposals to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons to increase the amount of time available for oral questions. [118179]

Mr. Tipping: No. But any Member of the House may put proposals to the Modernisation Committee.

Parliamentary Adjournments and Recesses

52. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make it her policy that hon. Members should be able *(a)* to have written questions answered and *(b)* to table and have published early-day motions during parliamentary adjournments; and if she will make a statement. [118178]

Mr. Tipping: The Modernisation Committee is currently looking at questions in the recess; until now, no Member has raised the matter of EDMs.

58. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the factors that she takes into account in determining parliamentary recesses. [118185]

Mr. Tipping: My right hon. Friend takes many factors into account in determining Parliamentary recesses, including the progress of business, Members' needs to have time for constituency business, and the desirability of arrangements which allow Members and staff to spend time with their families.

Visitor Facilities

54. **Angela Smith:** To ask the President of the Council to ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what recent discussions the Commission has had on the provision of refreshment facilities for visitors to the House. [118180]

Mr. Kirkwood: This is primarily a matter for the Catering Committee, as my hon. Friend knows. In my reply to her on 26 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 17–18, I indicated that provision of the Visitor Centre depended

upon acquisition and conversion of Westminster Hall cafeteria once Portcullis House was functioning. Work towards establishing the Visitor Centre is accordingly expected to begin in 2001.

Human Rights Committee

55. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to propose the establishment of a human rights committee. [118181]

Mr. Tipping: Draft Standing Orders for a Joint Committee on Human Rights are in preparation. The Government propose that the Committee should have a wide remit to study human rights in the United Kingdom. It remains the expectation that the Joint Committee will start its work before implementation of the Human Rights Act.

Electronic Voting

57. **Ms Coffey:** To ask the President of the Council what representations she has received on electronic voting. [118183]

Mr. Tipping: I have received no written representations.

Portcullis House

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee when Portcullis House will be opened. [118820]

Sir Sydney Chapman: Hon. Members and their staff will start to be moved into the building in September.

DEFENCE

Crossmaglen Gaelic Athletic Association

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what amount of public funds was paid as compensation to Crossmaglen Gaelic Athletic Association for use of a portion of their playing fields; and if he will make a statement. [119019]

Mr. Ingram: I have been asked to reply.

Responsibility for the matter in question has been delegated to the Compensation Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Denis Stanley. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Denis Stanley to Mr. John D. Taylor, dated 18 April 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me, as Chief Executive of the Compensation Agency in Northern Ireland, to reply to your recent Question about compensation paid to Crossmaglen Gaelic Athletic Association in respect of use of part of their land by the security forces.

Land belonging to the Association was first requisitioned by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland under the Emergency Provisions Act in 1974. In 1985 a sum of £150,000 was paid by way of compensation in respect of the period 1974 to February 1985. This compensation was a composite amount and covered both physical damage to the property and the requisitioning of land. For the period subsequent to February 1985 the amount of compensation payable in respect of requisitioned land has been the subject of an appeal to the County Court which is still on-going.

I hope this explains the position.

AWE Aldermaston

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 5 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 486–87W, on AWE Aldermaston, against what criteria the parent companies were judged to ensure that they achieved full compliance on safety performance. [118561]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* The assessments of the competing consortiums' bids were made on the basis of a safety criterion with 28 components of which 20 were classed as critical. Compliance was required against each of the critical components in order for the bid to be processed further. The components are as shown—(C=Critical; NC=Non-critical):

Policy, Strategy and General

To maintain, and where appropriate improve, an effective policy and strategy for ensuring high health safety and environmental performance (C).

Achievement of applicable standards and maintenance of company standards (C).

Track Record (C).

Co-operation with Authority's safety bodies (C).

Safety QA and documentation (C).

Provision of safety services (C).

Measuring Safety Performance

An effective safety performance measurement system to cover all significant and appropriate Environment Safety and Health matters on and off site (C).

Effective accident and incident investigation, analysis and reporting (C).

Planning, Implementing and Maintaining Safety

Five year plan (C).

Maintenance and improvement of an effective safety management system and improvement of performance as appropriate (C).

Provision of management prospectus (C).

Maintenance of site as safe place to be, safe working, justification of operations and facilities, peer review (C).

Control of hazardous materials, including criticality safety and explosives, and control of all wastes (C).

Nuclear weapon safety (C).

Provision of emergency response (C).

Restriction of access to designated premises (C).

Effective planning and implementation (NC).

Organisation for implementing Policy

Senior personnel (C).

The maintenance of effective communications on safety matters and provision of information (C).

Competence (C).

Safety culture (NC).

Management Control (NC).

Employee involvement (in Environment Safety and Health activity) (NC).

Regulatory interface (NC).

Audit, Review, Action tracking, Verification and Essential Services

Effective corrective action including planning and verification of close out (C).

An effective audit system with benchmarking (NC).

Collective review of safety performance information and analysis for trends and causes (NC).

Measures to maintain essential services (NC).

Munitions

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress with long-range precision munitions; and if he will make a statement. [117487]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The Strategic Defence Review identified precision weapons as an increasingly important military capability. The value of long-range all-weather precision weapons was confirmed during Kosovo and they are a key capability in the NATO Defence Capabilities Initiative. Long-range weapons allow the UK armed forces to strike with less risk to UK personnel and equipment, and precision guidance reduces the risk of civilian casualties.

Our current long-range precision strike capability is provided by the submarine-launched Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM) which entered service in 1998 and proved effective during Kosovo. From 2002 this capability will be complemented by the introduction of the air-launched Storm Shadow missile.

Ministry of Defence Police

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Royal Ordnance sites from which Ministry of Defence Police cover will be withdrawn; on what date this will take effect; and if he will make a statement. [117665]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 5 April 2000]:* Ministry of Defence Police are currently deployed at the Royal Ordnance sites in Bridgwater, Chorley, Glascoed, Nottingham and Radway Green. Royal Ordnance has requested that they be withdrawn as a cost saving measure and replaced by alternative arrangements. We have concluded that there is not sufficient reason to insist on their retention and are commencing consultation on the withdrawal of MDP from the sites in question subject to certain physical security enhancements required by the licensing authorities.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Ministry of Defence Police will be deployed to Kosovo in support of the UN International Police Force; what will be the length of their tour; what training they will receive; and if he will make a statement. [117667]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 5 April 2000]:* Up to 60 Ministry of Defence Police officers are to be deployed to Kosovo in support of the UN International Police for a 12-month tour of duty. All officers are currently undergoing a four-week training course including advanced firearms tactics, explosives and weapon searches, conflict resolution, personal safety and conditions in Kosovo.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will bring forward legislation to extend the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence Police to give them the same constabulary powers as Home Office police; and if he will make a statement. [117669]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 5 April 2000]:* The Ministry of Defence Police already have constabulary powers in the places defined in Section 2 of the Ministry of Defence Police Act 1987. The adequacy of these powers is currently being reviewed.

Procurement Projects

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the procurement projects worth £300 million or more for which, since 1996, *(a)* delivery dates, *(b)* stage payment dates and *(c)* in-service dates have been varied from those specified in the original contracts. [118264]

Dr. Moonie: The information requested is not readily available; however, I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Helsinki European Council

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence following the decisions made at the Helsinki European Council relating to a Common Defence and Security capability of the European Union, which tasks within the remit of armed forces acting on the authority of the Council are additional to those capable of being conducted by agreement of all members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation; and who is responsible for liaison between the Political and Military Committee of the European Council and the decision-making authority of NATO. [118866]

Mr. Hoon: At Helsinki, EU member states made a commitment to be able, by 2003, to deploy rapidly and sustain up to 60,000 troops capable of undertaking the full range of Petersberg tasks. The Petersberg tasks are defined as humanitarian intervention, rescue operations, peacekeeping, and crisis management (including peacemaking). NATO is capable of conducting all of these tasks.

The mechanisms for liaison between the EU Political and Security Committee and the NATO North Atlantic Council are being developed in accordance with the conclusions of the Helsinki European Council and the NATO Washington Summit.

Balkans (Equipment)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the total cost to his Department of equipment lost, damaged, and no longer available for MOD use in *(a)* Bosnia and *(b)* Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [119167]

Mr. Spellar: The estimated total cost of stock written off to date, in relation to operations in the Balkans, is:

(a) Bosnia: £11.0 million (including £1.303 million for one Hercules aircraft)

(b) Kosovo: £1.4 million.

Northern Ireland Regiments

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidelines govern the involvement of part-time and serving members of the armed forces in political activities; if members of the *(a)* Ulster Defence Regiment and *(b)* Royal Irish Regiment are subject to separate guidelines for Northern Ireland; and how many soldiers have been dismissed for political activities in each year since the UDR was created. [118980]

Mr. Spellar: Guidelines on political activity for members of the armed forces, including full-time and part-time members of the Royal Irish Regiment, are contained in Queens Regulations for each service.

The Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) used to have a separate set of Regulations with guidelines on political activities, and these clearly stated that Queens Regulations also applied to UDR personnel.

We have no records of the number of soldiers dismissed for engaging in political activities.

Meteorological Stations

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the social and economic impact on remote and island communities of the automation of meteorological stations; and if he will make a statement. [118969]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Ewins to Mrs. Ray Michie, dated 18 April 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the social and economic impact on remote and island communities of the automation of meteorological stations. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of The Met Office.

The Met Office is looking to improve efficiency and reduce costs in the delivery of weather services. The automation of meteorological stations is not a new initiative but an important part of this strategy.

Trials are to commence shortly to assess the feasibility of extending the automation process into areas where, up to now, manual observations have been seen as necessary for our operations. Assuming a satisfactory outcome from the trials, we plan to automate the observing functions at several locations around the United Kingdom, including Tiree Airport.

We recognise that the withdrawal of Met Office observers from Tiree, should this be the outcome, could have an adverse impact on the local community, and this I would very much regret. In particular, the services delivered by the Highlands and Islands Airport Ltd are likely to be affected. We are, therefore, discussing options with them to examine how they could continue to provide the Aerodrome Meteorological reports which are necessary for airport operations, in the absence of our observers.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Post Offices

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has defined what is a reasonable distance when determining access to a post office. [119757]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Decisions on access criteria will be made in the light of the Performance and Innovation Unit's report on the post office network and subsequent consultations with interested parties.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what agreement he has with the Post Office about the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of existing Crown post offices that should be maintained. [119002]

Mr. Alan Johnson: As set out in the White Paper "Post Office Reform: A World Class Service for the 21st Century", the Government agreed a strategy, reflecting proposals put by the Post Office to the trade unions, of retaining a core of directly owned and managed Crown offices. For the foreseeable future, the Post Office intends that at least 15 per cent. of the total business transacted by the counters' network is done at Crown offices.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if changes have taken place since May 1997 in the restrictions on the activities of Crown post offices. [119003]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No.

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he will promote to maximise the income of sub-postmasters from *(a)* benefit transactions and *(b)* other transactions following the introduction of automated credit transfers in post offices. [119205]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government have given a commitment that all benefit recipients who wish to access their benefits in cash at post offices will continue to be able to do so, both before and after the migration of benefit payments to automated credit transfer from 2003. By equipping the whole of the post office network with Horizon, a modern, automated IT platform towards the capital costs of which the Government are contributing £480 million, from spring 2001 the Post office will be able to improve its services to existing clients and take advantage of new business opportunities. In particular, Horizon offers the potential to move into automated network banking on an agency basis and to use the post office network as a delivery channel for electronic Government services.

Companies House

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what targets he has set Companies House for 2000–01. [119987]

Mr. Byers: I have set Companies House the following targets for the year 2000–01.

Operational Targets

To process 99 per cent. of statutory documents within five days of receipt at Companies House.

To achieve, on average, a monthly compliance rate for accounts submitted of 95 per cent.

To ensure that there is a minimum of 98 per cent. error-free work in current processing.

To ensure that 96 per cent. of all forms submitted to Companies House are captured error-free.

To answer 90 per cent. of all incoming telephone calls within 20 seconds.

Questions delegated to the Chief Executive

The Chief Executive to reply within 10 days to all letters from Members of Parliament delegated to him for reply.

Complaints Handling

To clear up 90 per cent. of complaints within five days.

Financial Targets

To maintain a unit cost reduction of 3 per cent. in real terms on document registration.

To achieve, taking one year with another, a 6 per cent. average rate of return based on the operating surplus expressed as a percentage of average net assets.

To pay bills due within 30 days, or other agreed credit terms, on receipt of goods or services or a valid invoice, whichever is later.

I have placed copies of the Corporate Plan in the Libraries of the House.

Council for Science and Technology

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if new appointments have been made to the Council for Science and Technology. [119985]

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has recently decided to increase the number of independent members to 16 and to appoint the following as new members:

Mr. Javaid Aziz, CEO, Aspective

Mr. Euan Baird, Chairman, Schlumberger Ltd.

Professor Vicki Bruce, Deputy Principal of Research, University of Stirling

Professor Sir Paul Nurse, Director General, Imperial Cancer Research Fund

Professor Peter Schuddeboom, Vice President, Nortel Networks

Professor David VandeLinde, Vice-Chancellor, University of Bath

Mr. John Weston, Chief Executive, BAE Systems.

These new members replace five previous members, namely:

Dame Bridget Ogilvie, Chairman, COPUS

Sir Robin Nicholson, Chairman, Rolls Royce plc

Professor Sir Stewart Sutherland, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of Edinburgh

Mr. J. Martin Taylor, Chairman, W. H. Smith Group

Professor Sir Keith O'Nions, Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence (from January 2000).

The Prime Minister also decided to re-appoint:

Sir Richard Sykes, Chairman, Glaxo Wellcome plc (until March 2003)

Professor Sir Aaron Klug, President of the Royal Society (until the end of his Presidency of the Royal Society later this year)

Professor Kumar Bhattacharyya, Director, Warwick Manufacturing Group, University of Warwick (until March 2003).

I am most grateful for the support and advice we have received from Council members so far and very much look forward to working with the new Council.

Collum Report

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he plans to take on the Collum report on BNFL; and if he will make a statement. [118798]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* I have now received an outline of the proposed changes from the BNFL Chairman and Chief Executive, following their initial review of BNFL management. It will be for the company to implement the proposed changes, which will be achieved over a period of time. Where relevant, these will need to be fully consistent with the company's site licence obligations and agreed by the Government as shareholder. More detailed announcements related to the Review will be made in due course.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the Collum report on BNFL. [118790]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 12 April 2000]:* I understand that Hugh Collum, the BNFL Chairman, intends shortly to make an announcement about the conclusions of his review.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119435]

Ms Hewitt: So that the Cabinet Office can publish the Spring 2000 report monitoring progress towards delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005, we are currently collecting data which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. I do not wish to pre-empt that report but I can say that we currently provide a range of services electronically which includes information and advice to small and medium enterprises via the Small Business Service Internet 'gateway', and other websites covering science and technology, information on 1.4 million companies (and facilities to register changes to company status), plus the award winning consumer gateway. By 2002, we shall be providing and contributing to more services in these areas and others such as trade promotion, company formations, oil well consents and applications for research grants.

Enterprise Fund

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he sought clearance from the EU Commission for the Enterprise Fund; and when he expects to reach agreement with the EU Commission on it. [119311]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The Enterprise Fund consists of a number of elements.

The existing Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme element of the Enterprise Fund continues to operate under "de minimis" arrangements, apart from in the agriculture and fisheries/aquaculture sectors, which have been separately notified and cleared. The "de minimis" arrangements allow for schemes that contain aid falling below a minimum threshold level to be accepted without State Aid notification.

With regard to the venture capital elements of the fund, my Department's officials are working with Commission officials to assist them in their development of a

framework for dealing with venture capital schemes on a community-wide basis. We expect this framework to be in place by summer 2000.

We expect the full amounts previously announced to be committed within this spending round.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he announced the establishment of the Enterprise Fund; and when the first payments will be made from it. [119310]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The Enterprise Fund was announced in the December 1998 Competitiveness White Paper (Cm 4176). Payments are already being made under the fund.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what changes the EU has asked for to his Department's scheme for an Enterprise Fund. [119312]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The EU has not asked for any changes to be made to my Department's scheme for the Enterprise Fund.

KONVER

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer of 16 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 274W, on KONVER, for what reason the KONVER Programme II Initiative was not renewed. [119051]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The European Commission proposed to reduce the number of Community Initiative programmes from 13 to three as part of the Agenda 2000 package. There is no proposal to continue with the KONVER initiative.

Although Community Initiatives provided benefits in many areas of the country it was often the case that effort involved by all concerned in implementing their relatively small programmes was out of all proportion to the amount of money involved.

Mobile Phone Networks

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to include the recommendations of the Stewart report in the contract requirements for the new mobile phone network contracts. [119689]

Ms Hewitt: The Government regulate mobile phone networks via licences granted under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1998 and the Telecommunications Act 1984.

The Report of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones chaired by Sir William Stewart is expected to be published in May. It would not be appropriate for the Government to comment on it until that time.

Longbridge Task Force

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the names and occupations are of the members of the Longbridge Task Force. [119016]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The members of the Rover Task Force have been drawn from a wide range of organisations and between them represent the regional key partners in the West Midlands region.

The original membership has expanded to 20 under the chairmanship of Alex Stephenson, who also chairs the Regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands.

The current members and their occupations are:

Member	*Occupation*
Alex Stephenson	Task Force Chair and Chairman of Advantage West Midlands
Sue Battle	Chief Executive Officer of Birmingham Chamber of Commerce
Colin Beardwood	Councillor, Worcestershire County Council and Chair of the Regional Chamber of the Local Government Association
Kumar Bhattacharyya	Director, Warwick Manufacturing Group, Warwick University
Albert Bore	Leader of Birmingham City Council and university lecturer
Gerard Coyne	TGWU Regional Industrial Organiser and Birmingham City councillor
David Cragg	Chief Executive of Birmingham and Solihull TEC
Tom Watson	Policy Adviser to the AEEU
Nick Paul	Chair of CBI and also Deputy Chief Executive of IMI PLC
Mike Wright	Vice Chancellor of Aston University
David Ritchie	Regional Director, Government Office for the West Midlands
Rosemary Thew	Regional Director, West Midlands Employment Service
Mr. Graham Broome	Chief Executive Officer, Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders
Richard Burden MP	MP, Northfield constituency in Birmingham
Rt. Revd Mark Santer	Bishop of Birmingham
David Botterill	Chief Executive, Engineering Employers Federation
Ian Pearson MP	MP, Dudley South constituency
Sir Norman Fowler MP	MP, Sutton Coldfield constituency
Bill Holmes	Midlands Secretary of Manufacturing, Science and Finance Trades Union and regional Chair of the TUC
David Nicholas	Managing Director, Unipart
Keith Hirst	Chief Executive of Metsec PLC and Chair of Black Country Consortium

Nuclear Energy

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has received a copy of the report by ERM Ltd. for the European Commission on the prospective future demand for nuclear energy and the commitment by the member states of the European Union to the Kyoto Climate Change agreement. [119137]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 13 April 2000]:* The Department has not yet received a copy of this report.

Hawk Exports (Zimbabwe)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his written answer of 17 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 629W, if Zimbabwe has repaid the full cost of the Hawk aircraft. [118633]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Yes.

Patent Office

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what targets he has set the Patent Office for 2000–01. [119986]

Mr. Byers: I have set the Patent Office the following targets for 2000–01.

Patents

1. To issue 14,500 patent search reports or combined search and examination reports on average within three months from the date of request, with 90 per cent. of those within four months from the date of request.
2. To grant 8,500 valid patents on average within two years from the date of filing of the request for substantive examination, with 90 per cent. of those within three years from the date of request.

Designs

3. To register 7,700 designs on average within five months from the date of filing of the application, with 90 per cent. of those within 12 months.

Trade Marks

4. To process 70,000 trade mark class applications with a target to register within nine months, 90 per cent. of those to which no substantive objections are raised or oppositions filed.

Finance

5. To pay 100 per cent. of bills within 30 days of receipt of goods or services or a valid invoice, whichever is the later.

Questions designated to the Chief Executive

6. The Chief Executive will reply within 10 working days to all letters from Members of Parliament delegated to her for reply.

Efficiency Targets

7. To increase output in relation to current expenditure by an average of at least 2 per cent. per annum over the period 1998–99 to 2002–03.
8. I have placed copies of the Corporate Plan in the Libraries of the House.

TREASURY

Tax Law Rewrite Project

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been achieved by the Tax Law Rewrite project in the last year; and what plans it has for the coming year. [119823]

Dawn Primarolo: I am pleased to announce that the Tax Law Rewrite project is making excellent progress and continues to enjoy wide support. The Inland Revenue have today published a report which reviews the recent progress of the project and outlines its work programmes for 2000–01.

The rewritten legislation produced by the project has been very well received by the main users in the tax community and they are enthusiastic that the project should continue. I am very pleased to tell the House that the project plans to have its first rewrite Bill ready for introduction in Parliament later this year.

Budget Calculations

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when it became his policy to base increases in fuel duty on a forecast of the likely rate of inflation in the following September. [118747]

Mr. Timms: The increase in fuel duties has been based on a forecast of inflation since July 1997. The methodology for calculating the inflation indexed basis for changes in excise duties was set out in that Budget and in all subsequent Budgets.

Insurance

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has *(a)* to review the regulatory and core structure of low contribution home service endowment insurance policies and *(b)* to propose amendments to the Industrial Assurance Act 1923. [119215]

Mr. Timms: The Government announced plans in June 1999 to amend the Industrial Assurance Acts 1923 and 1948. There has been useful recent consultation with the Association of British Insurers and the Association of Friendly Societies on the extent of the amendments. Following the amendments the FSA will regulate all home service business using its powers under the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in the UK *(a)* received their pension every four weeks, *(b)* received 12 pension payments and *(c)* received 13 pension payments in 1999–2000. [118834]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of retirement pension is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Jackie Ballard, dated 17 April 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many pensioners in the UK (a) received their pension every four weeks, (b) received 12 pension payments and (c) received 13 pension payments in 1999–2000.

At March 2000, a total of 3,873,606 pensioners were receiving their retirement pension by four weekly payments. The payments were made four weeks in arrears and paid by Automated Credit Transfer (ACT) direct into the pensioners bank or building society accounts. All customers who were paid retirement pension by four weekly payments throughout the year would receive 13 four weekly pension payments.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security by what percentage the basic retirement pension could be increased in April without reducing the expected balance of the National Insurance Fund at the end of the year 2001–02 below the minimum level recommended by the Government Actuary. [117588]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

The basic pension and linked benefits could be increased by 11.8 per cent. in April 2000 without reducing the National Insurance Fund below the minimum level recommended by the Government Actuary in 2001–02. However, funding this level of increase even in that year only and with a return to uprating in line with prices thereafter would lead to a large shortfall in the next year and in subsequent years. This would lead to an increase in rates of National Insurance Contributions. Thus it can be seen that allocation of a surplus to an immediate increase has consequences for future years by wiping out this surplus.

Effects on national insurance fund if basic retirement pension and linked benefits are increased by 11.8 per cent. above April 2000 rate

£ billion

	NI fund balance at end of year	*Minimum recommended*	*Excess/ shortfall*
1999–2000	13.8	7.7	6.1
2000–01	12.1	8.6	3.5
2001–02	9.0	9.0	0.0
2002–03	4.6	9.4	–4.8
2003–04	–1.3	9.8	–11.1

Source:
Government Actuary's Department

Minimum Income Guarantee

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners will benefit from the minimum income guarantee in the *(a)* Cleethorpes, *(b)* Great Grimsby, *(c)* Scunthorpe and *(d)* Brigg and Goole constituencies. [118653]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Minimum income guarantee recipients by parliamentary constituency

Constituencies	*Number of pensioners*
Cleethorpes	2,800
Great Grimsby	3,300
Scunthorpe	2,200
Brigg and Goole	2,500

Notes:
1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. MIG pensioners include those in residential care or nursing homes.
3. Numbers have been allocated by parliamentary constituency using the ONS postcode directory version 2.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1999

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in *(a)* Warrington and *(b)* Warrington, North constituency are in receipt of the minimum income guarantee. [118851]

Mr. Bayley: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Helen Jones, dated 17 April 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many pensioners in (a) Warrington and (b) Warrington North Constituency are in receipt of the minimum income guarantee.

The minimum income guarantee relates to Income Support pensioners aged 60 and over. The information is given in the table.

Thousand

Area	*Minimum income guarantee recipients*
Warrington North parliamentary constituency	2.3
Warrington local authority	4.7

These figures are from the Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry of November 1999. Please note the sample size of 5% and therefore, subject to sampling error. They have been rounded to the nearest hundred.

I hope this reply is helpful.

SEMA Medical Services

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the recent survey conducted by his Department into SEMA Medical Services' doctors, concerning the following of scrutiny guidelines by doctors, how many doctors *(a)* were subject to the survey and *(b)* have been identified as needing any remedial training. [119140]

Mr. Bayley: Medical Policy Group audited 200 scrutiny decisions of 23 doctors from one medical centre. Twelve doctors were found to have given advice below the standard required by the Medical Services Scrutiny Guidelines and appropriate remedial training will be given.

It is important to recognise that this survey was not based on a representative sample and we shall therefore be carrying out further audit of the scrutiny process to check whether or not a wider problem exists.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the survey conducted by his Department into SEMA Medical Services' doctors, concerning incorrect awards of Incapacity Benefit, how many awards have been *(a)* disallowed and *(b)* increased. [119141]

Mr. Bayley: The Department's Medical Policy Group recently conducted a survey of a sample of 200 claims for Incapacity Benefit which had been subjected to scrutiny by SEMA Medical Services' doctors to determine whether medical examination of claimants should be undertaken. The survey revealed that some Medical Services doctors had not followed the new scrutiny guidelines introduced in February 1999. Had the guidelines been followed claimants in the sample who may have continued in receipt of Incapacity Benefit would have been further assessed by medical examination. It is not possible to predict the outcome of the Benefits Agency's decision-maker's determination of eligibility for Incapacity Benefit in an individual case if evidence provided in the form of an examining doctor's report had been made available.

A report of a medical examination by a Medical Services doctor is but one piece of evidence alongside other information provided by the claimant and from other sources, which may include other medical evidence from the claimant's General Practitioner, that the decision-maker will consider in determining eligibility for an award of benefit.

As part of normal claims processing, those claimants in the sample upon whom advice was given by Medical Services' doctors to award benefit without medical examination will have their claims reassessed by strict adherence to the scrutiny guidelines and, where applicable, further evidence will be gathered.

No award from the survey sample was disallowed, although some may have been approved on insufficient evidence.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the recent survey by his Department into SEMA Medical Services' doctors, if he will list the principal failures in relation to doctors who were found not to be following scrutiny guidelines. [119138]

Mr. Bayley: The Department's Medical Policy Group's audit of the 200 Incapacity Benefit cases subjected to scrutiny by SEMA Medical Services' doctors highlighted three areas where Medical Services' doctors had not followed scrutiny guidance:

Acceptance of the claimed level of disability with insufficient medical evidence.

Inappropriate requests for further medical evidence when the case is re-referred.

Inappropriate advice given on the period in time following which the claim should be reassessed.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will deposit in the Library a copy of the letter from the Benefits Agency to SEMA Group's Director of Medical Services instructing Medical Services to ensure compliance with the medical quality standards specified by his Department. [119102]

Mr. Bayley: A copy of the letter from the Benefits Agency to Sema Group's Director of Medical Services will not be deposited in the Library in accordance with paragraph 7 of "The Code of Practice on Access to Government Information". However, I am able to tell the hon. Member that the letter sought assurances that Medical Services would ensure compliance with the medical quality standards in the contract and take corrective action where appropriate.

Benefits (Mortgage Rate)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how the mortgage rate for benefit payments is calculated. [119743]

Mr. Bayley: Mortgage payments for benefit claimants are based on a Standard Interest Rate, which is calculated by the Building Societies Commission and is based on the weighted average of basic rates charged by the main building societies.

Child Support (Mortgages)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his policy is on the termination of pre-existing endowment mortgages in order to establish a right to include payments towards the purchase of a new home in assessments of child support. [119321]

Angela Eagle: Housing costs, including those from repayment and endowment mortgages, are currently taken into account in the calculation of child support maintenance liability. However, if they are considered to be excessive, the amount allowed in the assessment may be restricted. Where a non-resident parent moves house, his new housing costs will be taken into account, although the existing assessment will be changed only if the effect of the new housing costs is to increase or reduce the liability by more than a fixed minimum amount.

Pensioners (Benefit Entitlement)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) of 13 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 232W, what change there has been to the estimate that between 530,000 and 870,000 pensioner benefit units are entitled to but not receiving Income Support; and what are the reasons for the change. [118883]

Mr. Bayley *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The take-up statistics are published annually; the last edition, covering the period 1997–98, was published on 24 September 1999 and showed that there were between 530,000 and 870,000 pensioner entitled non-recipients (ENRs) of Income Support. The statistics are drawn from around 8,500 pensioner benefit units interviewed in the annual Family Resources Survey (FRS), which collects information on incomes and benefit receipt, and details of all income and savings.

As part of the programme of poorer pensioner research a sample of pensioners who appeared to be ENRs in the FRS were visited with a view to asking about barriers to claiming Income Support and about ways of encouraging them to claim. Respondents were first asked about changes in their financial circumstances since their original FRS interview. This suggests that the allowance for misreporting, made by the Department's statisticians when producing take-up statistics, merits review. Statisticians are reviewing this evidence and will incorporate it in the next set of statistics on take-up of income related benefits which are due to be published in the summer.

Industrial Injury Benefit (Asbestosis)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people receive industrial injury benefit as a result of having contracted asbestosis. [119244]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the tables. It should be noted that prescribed disease D1 is referred to as pneumoconiosis, but that this term covers a range of lung diseases caused by dust, including coal-workers' pneumoconiosis and silicosis, as well as asbestosis.

The number of current assessments for pneumoconiosis (D1)

Thousand

IIDB current assessments for pneumoconiosis (D1)[1]	*Total*
Year ending 4 April 1998	11.4
Year ending 5 April 1997	11.9
Year ending 30 March 1996	12.0
Year ending 1 April 1995	12.9

The number of first diagnosed assessments attracting benefit, for pneumoconiosis (D1) associated with the asbestos agent, in each of the last five years

IIDB first diagnosed assessments for pneumoconiosis[2] *(D1 with the asbestos agent)*	*Number*
January to September 1999[3]	303
Year ending December 1998	305
Year ending December 1997	344
Year ending December 1996	479
Year ending December 1995	427

[1] Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit current assessments are based on a 10 per cent. clerical sample. An adjustment has been made for late statistical returns (except for 1996–97), but figures may still be subject to a small degree of undercount due to non-response.
[2] Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit first diagnosed assessments is based on a 100 per cent. count.
[3] Figures for 1999 are for nine months only. December 1999 quarterly figures are not yet available.
Source:
Information Centre.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Rail Services

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the amount of money earmarked for refurbishment of the *(a)* Holyhead-Chester-Crewe and *(b)* Wrexham to Bidston rail routes; and if he will make a statement. [118192]

Mr. Hill: The Department understands from Railtrack that:

(a) around £3 million is committed for renewals on the Holyhead-Chester-Crewe rail route, principally to increase the line speed from 75mph to 90mph where practical and install Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS). Additionally, it is expected that around half of the £62m of new rolling stock being delivered to First North Western Trains over the next few months will be running in and around this area.

(b) around £1 million is committed for renewals on the Wrexham to Bidston rail route, principally to install TPWS and improve stations and track.

Species Legislation

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to implement the recommendations of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee on species legislation; and if he will make a statement. [118426]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 10 April 2000]:* In autumn 1998, my Department requested the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to review the effectiveness of the species protection Schedules to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The JNCC has recently concluded its review and advises that the Schedules have been generally effective in deterring persecution of the species listed, that they should be retained to give legal protection to appropriate animals and plants, and also makes a number of recommendations.

I am already actively considering all of the issues raised in the JNCC's recommendations. Some, like the recommendation concerning enforcement of wildlife legislation, are already being addressed through the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill. With other aspects, I recognise that improvements to protection for threatened species in the wider countryside beyond the provisions of this Bill may be warranted and am considering what might be appropriate. Some measures may not necessarily require primary legislation, including JNCC's recommendation concerning the Quinquennial Review of the Schedules. I look forward to receiving JNCC's advice at the next Quinquennial Review in due course.

I also agree the problem caused by invasive alien species does need to be addressed and we plan to review the effectiveness of policy concerning non-native species which can present an ecological threat to the United Kingdom's indigenous wildlife.

Departmental Inquiries

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 311W, on departmental inquiries, what was the cost of each of his Department's commissioned reviews listed in his answer; what reports have been published to date; and what subsequent recommendations have been acted on. [118754]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Information for reports and recommendations from the reviews listed in the Answer of 3 April have been placed in the Libraries of the House. Information on the cost of each review is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

UK/USA Meetings

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what meetings have been held between United States Government officials and his Department in *(a)* the USA and *(b)* the UK in the last 12 months, indicating the dates and locations of the meetings and the subjects discussed. [118626]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* Ministers and officials of the Department are in regular contact with officials of the United States Government and discuss a wide range of subjects. In addition to bilateral contracts, we often meet them in the margins of other international meetings.

Detailed information of meetings is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Greater London Authority

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the staffing structure of the units established to prepare for the establishment of the Greater London Authority. [118836]

Mr. Hill: The Government announced on 31 March 1999 the appointment of a Head of Transition for the Greater London Authority (GLA) and on 27 July 1999, the issuing of a consultation paper—"The Shape of Things to Come"—on the initial organisation of the GLA. Following the consultation period, I announced, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) on 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 482W, the publication of a

response document to the consultation—"Shaping up for the Mayor and Assembly". This highlighted some minor changes to the organisational structure originally proposed. Copies of both documents were placed in the House Library.

Work has since proceeded to put in place an initial staffing structure, along the broad lines set out in the consultation paper. The future structure of the GLA, including permanent appointments for senior posts, will, of course, be a matter for the GLA itself, once it is established.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the staff posts which have been created to prepare for the establishment of the Greater London Authority, indicating the salaries of those posts and the length of their contracts; [118837]

(2) how many staff have been *(a)* appointed and *(b)* seconded by the Government to prepare for the establishment of the Greater London Authority. [118838]

Mr. Hill: The Government announced in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on 31 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 76W, the setting up of a Transition Team to make the arrangements for the establishment of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and to enable the Mayor and Assembly to operate effectively from 8 May 2000. The Transition Team currently comprises 52 temporary staff, of whom 17 are on secondment from local government, the Civil Service and other organisations, 15 have been appointed on short-term contracts and 20 are agency staff.

To date, 55 new permanent GLA staff have been appointed. These comprise secretarial, administrative, receptionist, human resources, legal, financial and best value staff, on salaries ranging from £18,800 to £49,000. In addition, 135 staff from the former London Research Centre, London Ecology Committee and London Planning Advisory Committee are reporting to the Secretary of State from 1 April and will transfer to the GLA on 8 May 2000 (or, in the case of a small group of London Research Centre staff, to Transport for London on 8 July 2000).

As well as the Transition Team, some 50 civil servants in the Government Office for London are currently working on aspects of the establishment of the GLA and its functional bodies, including the drafting of secondary legislation and transfer orders and schemes, support to the Greater London Returning Officer, and arrangements for the payment of grant.

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he intends to issue to the Greater London Authority on ethical standards under section 66 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999. [119825]

Mr. Hill: I have today placed copies of the Secretary of State guidance to the Greater London Authority on ethical standards in the Library of the House.

Lorry Weights

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 427W, on 44 tonne lorries, what studies he has *(a)* carried out and *(b)* commissioned on the effect on (i) rail freight and (ii) the environment of allowing the use of 44 tonne lorries; if he will publish data on the expected level of direct transfers between road and rail freight following the introduction of such lorries; and if he will list the measures the shadow Strategic Rail Authority is planning to support rail freight. [118841]

Mr. Hill: In its interim report "Permitting 44 tonne lorries for general use in the UK", the Commission for Integrated Transport considered carefully the impact of 44 tonne lorries on the rail freight market.

The Government accept the Commission's view that the overall environmental advantage lies in allowing 44 tonne lorries to operate generally. Not only will the efficiency savings result in a substantial reduction in lorry mileage but the use of 6-axle lorries, with a lower drive axle weight, will cause less wear to roads and bridges than existing 40 tonne, 5-axle vehicles already on our roads. This is based on research carried out by the US Highways Research Board, and confirmed by the UK Transport Research Laboratory and by work carried out in Germany.

The Commission concluded that further work to estimate the precise effect on rail freight's market share would be unlikely to produce reliable results in the light of the Rail Regulator's forthcoming review of track access charges and other factors.

The Government set up the shadow Strategic Rail Authority (sSRA) with a remit to develop detailed recommendations on measures to promote the growth of rail freight. That work will help inform our 10-year plan for transport, due to be published in the summer, and the Commission's final report on 44 tonne lorries, expected in the autumn.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Commission for Integrated Transport will make its final report on the case for allowing 44 tonne vehicles on to UK roads; and what assessment his Department has made of the impact of permitting 44 tonne lorries on the carriage of goods by rail. [119157]

Mr. Hill: I understand that the Commission for Integrated Transport (CfIT) hope to produce their final report on 44 tonne lorries and the development of rail freight in late autumn this year. I also understand that the report will concentrate on options for rail freight and will not revisit the case for 44 tonne lorries.

My Department relied on CfIT's very thorough analysis of the effects on rail freight of the introduction of 44 tonne lorries, and has not carried out separate studies.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department's announcement on raising the maximum general lorry weight limit to 44 tonnes was made to the House. [119279]

Mr. Hill: My noble Friend the Minister for Transport wrote to my hon. Friend on 11 April explaining that this announcement was included in the Budget Red Book.

Airport Slots

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his

answer of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 427–28W, concerning airport slots, which airports other than Heathrow are within the jurisdiction of ACL Ltd; to whom ACL is accountable for its operation of the EC Regulation; who pays the company; and if details of *(a)* ACL's contract and *(b)* the fees paid are available for public inspection. [118868]

Mr. Mullin: In addition to Heathrow, ACL has been appointed as co-ordinator under the EC Regulation for Gatwick, Stansted and Manchester airports. The company also acts on a non-statutory basis for Aberdeen, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Jersey, London City, London Luton, and Newcastle airports.

ACL's contract is with the airport operators; it is therefore in the first instance accountable to the airport. At the four fully co-ordinated airports, grievances could also be taken to the airport co-ordination committee, on which the airport operators, air carriers and air traffic control providers are represented. In addition, the Airport Slots Allocation Regulations 1993 place a statutory duty on airport co-ordinators to operate in accordance with the EC Regulation; their actions are challengeable in court. The Secretary of State has the power to withdraw his approval of the appointment of a co-ordinator if satisfied that the co-ordinator has acted other than in an independent manner.

75 per cent. of ACL's income comes from the fees that it charges to the airports where it acts as co-ordinator. About 21 per cent. comes from the 11 UK airlines that own the company, and the remainder from data sales, training and consultancy, and similar activity.

ACL's contracts are commercially sensitive and not available for public inspection. Its Annual Report and Accounts are available for inspection at Companies House.

London Underground

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will conduct the test involving the public sector comparator for London Underground funding in public; [119020]

(2) if he will *(a)* place the report by his financial advisers on the funding of London Underground in the Library and *(b)* ensure that the public sector comparator is published before any contracts are signed. [119021]

Mr. Hill: I refer to the answers given to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 525–26W, and to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 337W.

We have already placed in the Library of the House a detailed note describing the methodology London Transport has used to construct the public sector comparator against which bids for infrastructure improvement and maintenance contracts under the Public Private Partnership (PPP) will be tested. This methodology has been reviewed by KPMG as London Underground's independent, external auditors. They have confirmed that it accords with the relevant Treasury guidance and is appropriate to the circumstances of the PPP.

We will release the actual values produced by the comparator only once negotiations with bidders have been completed. To publish these any earlier would expose the taxpayer's negotiating position, and thus jeopardise our chances of securing best value.

Similarly, when Pricewaterhouse submitted their report on the options for London Underground, we produced a summary of the facts and analysis that underpinned the decision to proceed with the PPP. This was published and placed in the Library of the House in March 1998. To release the Pricewaterhouse report in full would have compromised our negotiating position.

Rail Freight

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what extra grants he plans to offer to rail freight companies to enable them to increase the carriage of goods by rail. [119184]

Mr. Hill: This financial year we have set a Freight Grants budget of £50 million for companies who choose to move goods by rail rather than road.

Under the Transport Bill, administration of the grants will pass to the Strategic Rail Authority. The shadow SRA is looking at whether the existing schemes fit its objectives and strategies. It will be able to develop the existing schemes and to introduce new ones.

Budget (Transport Schemes)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the breakdown is of the £280 million for transport schemes announced in the press notices from his Department after the Budget; and how many of those schemes are for *(a)* road and *(b)* rail improvements. [119014]

Mr. Hill: Details of the allocation of £250 million additional resources for transport in England were set out in a reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) on 24 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 702–03W.

Ribble Estuary

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect on wildfowl in the Ribble Estuary, Lancashire of global warming. [119100]

Mr. Mullin: My Department supports the UK Climate Impacts Programme at the University of Oxford to help organisations assess vulnerability to climate change. Three national projects concerning climate change impacts on biodiversity are currently in progress within the Programme, two of which are supported by my Department and MAFF. The first study is a general review of implications of climate change for nature conservation policies in the UK. The second is a project involving integrated assessments in two regions, NW England and East Anglia. The third is a modelling assessment of impacts on species and habitats in Britain and Ireland, including wildfowl in river estuaries. All three projects are in progress and the results have not yet been assessed. This is wider than, and would be applicable to, the Ribble Estuary, but no specific assessment has been made in the Ribble Estuary.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to increase monitoring of wildfowl in the Ribble Estuary, Lancashire. [119099]

Mr. Mullin: The Ribble Estuary has been monitored since 1970 through the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). The WeBS is a joint scheme of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to monitor the non-breeding birds in the United Kingdom. Counts are made annually at around 2,000 wetland sites in the United Kingdom; estuaries and large still waters predominate. The Department believes the current monitoring of the Ribble Estuary to be sufficient.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice his Department has received from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other wildlife organisations concerning the Ribble Estuary and global warming. [119098]

Mr. Mullin: Research contractors working for the Department, MAFF and the UK Water Industry have held consultations with a large number of stakeholders in NW England in connection with an on-going study of climate change impacts in NW England. However, the Department is not aware of any specific concerns raised about the Ribble Estuary.

Biosafety Protocol

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the United Kingdom plans to ratify the Biosafety Protocol agreed in Montreal. [118939]

Mr. Meacher: The United Kingdom intends to sign and ratify the Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity at the earliest opportunity consistent with our European Community obligations. The Protocol will be open for signature at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, Kenya, by states and regional economic integration organisations from 15–26 May, and at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 5 June 2000 to 4 June 2001. The implications of the Protocol on the overall EU legislative framework must be fully assessed before ratification can be completed. As made clear in the Environment Council conclusions agreed on 30 March, we will be working with our European partners to ensure ratification as early as possible to ensure entry into force of the Protocol at an early stage.

Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources are available to the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee to commission independent scientific, technical and other support studies from institutes and academic establishments; and what powers the Chairman of the Committee has to second relevant experts to assist the committee or its sub-committees. [119135]

Mr. Meacher: The Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee generally spends very little on supporting studies for its work. When it has, the sums involved have typically been of the order of £10,000 to £20,000 per annum. Under the Committee's agreed operational arrangements, the Chairman can, as appropriate, co-opt members with expertise relevant to particular work items.

Waste Dumping

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what action he is taking to ensure that waste is not illegally dumped; and what assessment he has made of the impact of the landfill tax on the illegal dumping of waste; [119242]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the danger to the public posed by illegally dumped waste. [119241]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have put strict controls in place to ensure that waste is disposed of without danger to the public. The Environment Agency is responsible for their enforcement. It is a criminal offence to contravene these controls and there are severe penalties for anyone convicted of doing so. We have asked the Environment Agency to continue a vigorous policy of prosecuting, where it has the evidence, anyone who illegally disposes of waste on sites which have neither a waste management licence nor a licensing exemption registered with the Agency.

We have also commissioned research into the effects of the landfill tax and a copy of the research report "Effects Of Landfill Tax—Reduced Disposal Of Inert Waste To Landfill" has been placed in the Library of the House. One of the aims of the research was to establish whether there is evidence of illegal waste disposal by abuse of licensing exemptions. The allegations of abuse centre on two of the current licensing exemptions and we are reviewing these exemptions in the light of the report's findings.

Land and Property Budget

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received concerning the Land and Property Budget from regional development agencies in England. [119025]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* None.

Electric Goods

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the UK's EU partners about altering the potentially misleading energy use measurement for domestic refrigerators. [119292]

Mr. Meacher: The European Commission and member states have held discussions with manufacturers' representatives about methods for more consistent reporting of the efficiency performance of several product types covered by the EU energy label regime, including domestic refrigerators, and this has resulted in a protocol applied by the industry since the end of 1998. In the particular case of domestic refrigerators, a further

important development has been the introduction of minimum standards requiring the removal of less efficient appliances (with an energy label rating of "D" or below) from the EU market from September last year.

Road Safety

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the measures which he is taking to reduce the number of road accidents; what is his evaluation of the impact of these measures; if it is his policy to increase the maximum penalties for drivers who cause death and injury to others; and what further measures he proposes to take to promote road safety. [119695]

Mr. Hill: The new road safety strategy "Tomorrow's roads—safer for everyone" sets out the measures the Government are taking to improve road safety. The strategy was published on 1 March 2000 and copies are available in the House Library.

In terms of the expected impact of the strategy, new casualty reduction targets have been set. By 2010, we are aiming to reduce the overall number of people killed or seriously injured in road accidents by 40 per cent; to reduce the number of children killed or seriously injured by 50 per cent. and to reduce the rate of slight injuries by 10 per cent, compared with the average for 1994–98.

As the strategy document explains, the Government are undertaking an urgent review, led by the Home Office, of penalties for a wide range of road traffic offences, including those involving the death and injury of other road users. In the light of this review, we will decide whether penalties need to be changed to provide a greater deterrent against bad driving.

Hedges

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will report on responses to the consultation paper on high hedges; and if he will make a statement. [119708]

Mr. Mullin: We are currently analysing the responses to this consultation. We hope to make a statement, setting out our decisions on the way forward on this issue and the reasons for them, by the summer.

EU Structural Fund

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made with programme agreement for those areas that have lost Objective 2 status but have entitlement to transitional funding; and if he will make a statement. [119560]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Following the formal approval of the UK Objective 2 map on 30 March, the UK can now submit draft Objective 2 programmes to the European Commission. We formally lodged with the Commission on 14 April the Objective 2 programme documents for Yorkshire and the Humber; North East; West Midlands; East Midlands; North West; London; East of England and South East. (The programme for the South West will be lodged at a slightly later date.) This should ensure that these programmes will be eligible for funding to be backdated to 1 January 2000, and will help in meeting financial commitments in the first year of the programme.

These programmes documents include details of plans for transitional areas in each region. We fully anticipate that, subject to negotiations with the European Commission, all the English Objective 2 programmes will be approved before the end of the year.

Mobile Homes

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the maximum amount of commission which can be claimed by the site owner on the sale of mobile homes; and if he will make a statement. [119659]

Mr. Mullin: The maximum amount of commission payable to the site owner on the sale of a mobile home is currently 10 per cent. of the sale price. I expect to receive shortly a report by the Park Homes Working Party covering the statutory framework of controls over the park homes industry.

Deprivation (London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many applications he has received for funding from London borough councils to tackle local deprivation within their borough in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [119588]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The following applications have been received from the London boroughs for funding from the Single Regeneration Budget, which tackles local deprivation, in the last 12 months.

Single Regeneration Budget Round 5–18 local authority-led final bids received in April 1999.

Single Regeneration Budget Round 6–18 local authority-led Expressions of Interest received in March 2000.

Other bids may have contained local authorities as partners in the schemes, but not formally leading those bids.

Zoo Licensing Act 1981

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to exempt farm attractions from the provisions of the Zoo Licensing Act 1981. [119699]

Mr. Mullin: The Zoo Licensing Act 1981 requires any establishment where wild animals are kept for exhibition (other than a circus or pet shop) to which members of the public have access, with or without charge for admission, on more than seven days in any period of 12 consecutive months, to be licensed.

Farm attractions which keep wild animals would qualify as zoos under the Act. There are no plans to exempt them from its provisions.

Health and Safety

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives

are being taken by the Health and Safety Executive and his Department to increase health and safety awareness among young workers. [119596]

Mr. Meacher: My Department fully supports the current programme of the Health and Safety Commission and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to make young people aware of health and safety risks in preparation for work from an early age. HSE is collaborating with the Department for Education and Employment in embedding health and safety throughout the education system and has recently published guidance for organisers of work experience. Research is planned into the particular problems of young people new to work and the most effective means of communicating with them. HSE continues to work with organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the TUC in initiatives to get messages across to young people at, or about to start, work.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people under the age of 25 years have been killed or seriously injured at work in the last year for which figures are available. [119595]

Mr. Meacher: Provisional data for 1998–99[1] as reported to all enforcing authorities are set out in the table. This excludes 86 fatalities and 5,329 major injuries where the age of the injured person was not recorded.

	Fatal injuries	*Non-fatal or major injuries*[2]
Employees	20	3,845
Self employed	1	42
Members of the public[3]	80	13,067
Total	101	16,954

[1] Data are for 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999

[2] As defined by the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995, according to the employment status of the injured person

[3] Included suicides and trespassers on railways

Cornish

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to complete his Department's assessment of the status of the Cornish language before ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in November this year. [119348]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We will consider carefully the Government's position on Cornish, taking account of the findings of an independent academic study commissioned by the Government Office for the South West and in consultation with other Departments. The Government expect to be in a position to ratify the Charter later this year. The timing of ratification does not depend on the outcome of our consideration of the issue of Cornish.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to publish the recently completed study report into the status and usage of the Cornish language in Cornwall. [119347]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Copies of the report of the independent academic study on Cornish, commissioned by the Government Office for the South West, will be published shortly and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report will be available on the Government Office's website www.gosw.gov.uk and on request.

Ministerial Statements

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his Department's letter of 5 April to the right hon. Member for Fylde, signed by the Private Secretary to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, if it is the policy of his Department not to provide explanations of ministerial statements if the source for the facts contained therein is party political briefings. [119594]

Mr. Hill: I understand that this question arises from an exchange during oral questions on 13 April 1999, *Official Report*, column 13. I assume that my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) was making reference to Sir Horace Cutler's internal report for the Tory Group on the GLC, which found that the only way the Tube could be privatised would be to reduce off-peak services to no more than two trains an hour.

Motorcycles

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the benefits of reducing vehicle excise duty to zero for motorcycles under 125cc. [119598]

Mr. Hill: In November 1998, the Government consulted on a range of options for the environmental reform of Vehicle Excise Duty, including the creation of a new low VED band for motorcycles with engines up to 125cc. The benefits of motorcycle use are currently being examined in support of the work of the DETR's Advisory Group on Motorcycles. The outcome of those considerations will inform future decisions on Vehicle Excise Duty, which are a matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to encourage more commuters to travel into London by motorcycle. [119597]

Mr. Hill: As London is shortly to have a Mayor, this issue will be for his or her consideration in drawing up an integrated transport strategy. Section 142 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 makes it clear that the Mayor's integrated transport strategy should encompass all forms of transport.

The Government's policy on transport was set in the White Paper "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" which, among other things, included a commitment to establish an advisory group on motorcycling. My noble Friend the Minister of State set up this group in May 1999.

The Government have also published guidance, which encourages local authorities to take account of motorcyclists when preparing their local transport plans.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to local authorities on developing their own motorcycle strategy. [119600]

Mr. Hill: Local authorities are due to submit five-year local transport plans (LTPs) to Government by 31 July 2000. LTPs will give local authorities the discretion to devise integrated transport strategies at the local level in partnership with the local community. Last month my Department issued local authorities with guidance on producing LTPs. This encouraged local authorities to take account of the contribution that powered two-wheelers can make in delivering integrated transport—for example their use in congested traffic conditions or as an alternative to the car in remote areas—and the needs of motorcyclists, including parking, interchange facilities and appropriate road maintenance. A copy of the guidance—"Guidance on Full Local Transport Plans"—has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many road accidents *(a)* involving motorcyclists and *(b)* in total were caused by spilled diesel fuel in each of the last three years; and if he will revise construction and use Regulations for goods vehicles and PSVs to ensure that spillage from diesel fuel tanks is prevented by tamper-proof physical measures within the tank itself. [119599]

Mr. Hill: In 1999 information on the presence of oil or diesel on the road surface at the site of road accidents was collected for the first time and the data are not yet available. However, early indications are that accidents involving oil or diesel are 0.2 per cent. of all accidents; of which, 30 per cent. involved motorcycles (less than 1 per cent. of motorcycle accidents). Vehicle construction standards are agreed at a European level. A recently agreed amendment to the European fuel tank Directive includes measures to minimise fuel spillage due to missing or insecure fuel caps. We will be implementing all the mandatory provisions of the Directive, and will be considering whether the optional provisions are likely to strengthen our current construction and use requirements.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will encourage local authorities to exempt motorcycles from road user and workplace levy charging schemes. [119601]

Mr. Hill: Our response to our consultation paper, "Breaking the Logjam", which we published on 22 February, set out our policy on exemptions for motorcycles from road user charges and the workplace parking levy.

We intend to leave decisions on exemptions from road user charges to local discretion. Including motorcycles in a road user charging scheme would require practical difficulties to be overcome. We will explore these further with those local authorities that are actively considering a charging scheme as part of our Charging Development Partnership.

As to workplace parking levies, we propose that motorcycles should generally be exempt from counting towards a workplace parking licence total, but we will consider proposals from local authorities on their merits.

North Wales Main Line

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the reliability of the private commercial study produced by Virgin trains on the electrification of the North Wales main line; [119612]

(2) if he will commission an independent public study on the viability of the electrification of the North Wales main line. [119611]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans to commission an independent public study as the former Office of Passenger Rail Franchising, now the shadow Strategic Rail Authority, had no reason to doubt the reliability of the study produced by Virgin Trains in March 1999.

Road Schemes

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the *(a)* deferred road schemes by authority featured in the Local Transport Settlement for 2000–01 and *(b)* road schemes contained in the provisional local transport plans for 2001–02 to 2004–05; [119716]

(2) if he will ensure that road schemes costing more than £5 million contained in full local transport plans will not be accepted by the Government unless there is clear evidence that alternative solutions to traffic problems have been considered first, along with a statement of why such solutions have been rejected. [119717]

Mr. Hill: A decision to defer consideration of the following major road schemes until the Full Local Transport Plans are received this year was announced last December in the Provisional Local Transport Settlement for 2000–01:

Area	*Scheme*
Barnsley	Cudworth Bypass
Birmingham	Northfield Regeneration
Birmingham	Selly Oak Access Road
Bristol	A4 Bath Road to Callington Road Link
Cheshire	A34 Alderley Edge Environmental Bypass
Cumbria	Carlisle Northern Development Route
Darlington	Darlington Cross Town Route Eastern Section
Derby	Derby Spur Extension
Derbyshire	Markham Employment Growth Zone
Devon	Barnstaple Western Bypass
Dorset	Weymouth Transportation and Regeneration Project
East Sussex	Newhaven Port Access Road
Kent	East Kent Access (Phase 1)
Kent	East Kent Access (Phase 2)
Leeds	East Leeds Link Road
Leeds	Leeds Inner Ring Road (Stage 7)
Lincolnshire	Future Major Economic Regeneration Scheme
Liverpool	Hall Lane Area Improvement
Medway	A228 Chattenden to Ropers Lane
Middlesbrough	East Middlesbrough Transport Corridor
North East Lincolnshire	South Humber Bank Link Road (Stage 2)
Rotherham	West Bawtry Road Improvement
Rutland	Oakham/(Langham) Bypass
Sandwell	Cradley Heath Town Centre Strategy (A4100)
Sheffield	Inner Relief Road—Stages II and III
Staffordshire	Biddulph Bypass
Staffordshire	Rugeley Eastern Bypass Stage 2
Stoke-on-Trent	Hanley Bentilee Link
Suffolk	South Lowestoft Relief Road
Surrey	A244 Cross Thames Transport Corridor
Wiltshire	Western Wiltshire Regeneration Corridor
Wirral	Birkenhead Town Link Division
Worcestershire	Wyre Piddle Bypass

The following decisions were reached on the remaining major road schemes contained in the Provisional Local Transport Plans:

Area	*Scheme*
Accepted:	
Essex	A131 Great Leighs Bypass
Leicestershire	Ashby Bypass Stage 2
Norfolk	Broome and Ellingham Bypass
Nottingham (G.N.)	A6002/A6007 Coventry Lane Improvement
Shropshire	A53 Hodnet Bypass
Somerset	Bridgewater Northern Distributor
Staffordshire	Burntwood Bypass
Stockton-on-Tees	South Stockton Link
Provisionally accepted:	
Barnsley	Coalfields Link Road Phases 2 and 3
Bedfordshire	A507 Ridgmont Bypass and Woburn Link
Bedfordshire	Bedford Western Bypass
Buckinghamshire	A4146 Stoke Hammond and Linsdale Western Bypass
Cambridgeshire	A142 Fordham Bypass
Doncaster	A6023 Denaby Main Division
Hertfordshire	Baldock Bypass
Manchester, Salford	Manchester/Salford Inner Relief Road (Regent Road/Gore Street)
North Yorkshire	Scarborough Integrated Transport Scheme
Nottinghamshire	A617 Mansfield Ashfield Regeneration Route
Suffolk	Stowmarket B1115 Relief Road
Rejected:	
Birmingham	Dudley Road Traffic Management Phase 2
Cornwall	Grampound Bypass
East Sussex	Bexhill and Hastings Link Road
Norfolk	Great Yarmouth A47/A149 Link Road
Reading	Cow Lane Bridges/Oxford Road Relief Road
Rotherham	A57(T) Todwick Crossroads to M1 J31
Stoke-on-Trent	Tunstall Northern Bypass
Stoke-on-Trent	City Centre Link
Warwickshire	Barford Bypass
West Sussex	Angmering Bypass

The "Guidance on Full Local Transport Plans" which was published in March of this year makes it clear that before major road schemes can be accepted for funding if bid for in the Full Local Transport Plans, local authorities will need to demonstrate that there is a problem that needs addressing and that they have looked for alternative solutions, in accordance with the principles of New Approach to Appraisal.

Shadow Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the shadow Strategic Rail Authority to reach a decision on the plans sent to them by Railtrack. [118691]

Mr. Hill: The shadow Strategic Rail Authority is consulted frequently about Railtrack's plans. Regulation of Railtrack is, however, the responsibility of the Rail Regulator.

Climate Change Levy

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the European Commission to approve the UK's state aid notification in respect of proposed reductions to the climate change levy for companies which agree with energy efficiency arrangements. [119156]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

Officials have had helpful discussions with the Commission about the UK's state aids notification. We expect further useful progress to be made over the summer.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the compatibility of the proposed climate change levy rebates and exclusions for a 10-year period with the latest draft of the European Commission's guidelines on state aid. [119154]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

The UK regards the revised draft Community guidelines on state aid for environmental protection as a helpful step forward. However, the UK and other member states have made suggestions for improvement. As such, any assessment of their application in particular instances would be premature.

HEALTH

Dental Services

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children *(a)* under five and *(b)* under 10 years old have been treated for dental decay in the NHS in each of the last 10 years. [117946]

Mr. Hutton: Information is available for the number of fillings and extractions for which General Dental Service dentists make a payment claim. This is shown in the table for the age groups 0 to four years and five to nine years for England and Wales in 1998–99.

Data on the number of children receiving treatment for fillings and extractions are not available. Some children may have more than one treatment within the year.

Thousand

	Aged 0–4 years	*Aged 5–9 years*
Fillings	104	1,059
Extractions	27	225

Comparable figures for earlier years are not available.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the relative cost of the use in dentistry of *(a)* mercury-based amalgams and *(b)* non-metal-based amalgams; and if he will make a statement. [118403]

Mr. Hutton: The table provides the number and cost of general dental services treatments using different restorative materials in England in 1998–99. Dental amalgam is more durable and easier to insert than the other materials.

Treatment	*Number (Million)*	*Cost (£ million)*
Amalgam fillings	8.3	91.6
Composite resin fillings	4.9	52.2
Glass ionomer fillings	1.9	20.0
Total	15.0	163.8

Modernisation Action Teams

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many members of the NHS Modernisation Action Teams are *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* civil servants, *(c)* representatives of professional or staff bodies, *(d)* front-line NHS staff and *(e)* representatives of patients' organisations. [118694]

Mr. Hutton: We set out full membership details in press notice 2000/208 on 4 April. This indicated that the National Health Service Modernisation Action teams have 134 members. The membership was chosen to ensure wide representation from interested parties and individuals have been selected from a variety of backgrounds. There are five Ministers; 19 civil servants; 15 representatives of professional or staff bodies; thirty nine front-line NHS staff; and 16 representatives of patients' organisations. Additionally there are 40 members who, while not fitting into these precise categories, include leading commentators and senior managers.

Vulnerable Adults

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to institute police checks on employees in the National Health Service working with vulnerable adults. [118740]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) on 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 377W, and his response in relation to police checks.

The Care Standards Bill will establish a new scheme to identify health and care workers who have harmed vulnerable adults and ban them from such work in the future.

Under the Protection of Vulnerable Adults scheme, providers of prescribed services within the National Health Service and in independent healthcare settings will be required to refer individuals for inclusion in the list. There will be a duty of providers of these services to check that prospective employees are not on the list and to refuse employment in that field to any person found to be on the list.

Initially the list will be operated by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. Once the Criminal Records Bureau is established, the Bureau will be able to supply an individual with a criminal record certificate or enhanced criminal record certificate which would indicate whether they were included in the Protection of Vulnerable Adults list.

While police checks can identify individuals who have come to the attention of the police, clearly there is no substitute for employers undertaking thorough checks into the background and employment history of applicants for all vacancies.

Treatment Out of Area

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the percentage of treatments carried out in hospitals in *(a)* health authority areas and *(b)* health regions other than that in which the patient was resident in each year from 1980 to date. [118829]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is shown in the table for the years 1990–91 to 1998–99. Data for previous years are unavailable centrally.

Percentage of treatments carried out in National Health Service hospitals in health areas other than that in which the patient was resident, by health authority and region, England 1990–91 to 1998–99 [1]

	Health authority	*NHS region*
1990–91	25.4	9.0
1991–92	24.7	7.9
1992–93	23.3	7.4
1993–94	22.1	7.7
1994–95	21.5	7.1
1995–96	21.6	7.4
1996–97	22.7	6.4
1997–98	24.7	8.9
1998–99	22.6	6.8

[1] Includes overseas residents

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his Department's energy efficiency performance target, expressed as a percentage change in comparison to 1990–91, for each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [118995]

Ms Stuart: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 548–49W. It was explained then that a new target had been set across the Government estate to apply from 2000–01, of a 1 per cent. per annum reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

The Department will aim to meet this target which represents a change against the previous cross-Government target to 31 March 2000, which was expressed in terms of reductions in energy expenditure. Measurement in greenhouse gas emissions provides a much better fit with the current climate change programme and the United Kingdom's Kyoto targets. The base year will be 1999–2000 as it was the final year to which the previous target applied. Figures will be released when they are available on performance in 1999–2000 against the target to 31 March 2000 with 1990–91 as the base year.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the percentage change compared to 1990–91 in his Department's energy efficiency in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [118994]

Ms Stuart: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 582W, which reported progress for all central government departments by 31 March 1988. It is hoped that results for the period up to March 1999 will be published shortly.

Patient Records

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps he is taking to phase out the use of Lloyd George envelopes and promote the use of A4 folders as the standard means of storing patient records; [118954]

(2) what steps he is taking to harmonise paper-based records within the National Health Service; and if he will instigate a review of current systems. [118953]

Ms Stuart: National Health Service paper record-keeping systems have previously been submitted to extensive review, and there are no current plans to instigate further examinations. The replacement of Lloyd George envelopes with A4 folders as the standard means of holding paper records is not under consideration.

Future developments in record-keeping will be driven by the information strategy "Information for Health", which is committed to the vision of electronic record-keeping, as befits the modern NHS.

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many different computer-based records systems are in use by general practitioners; and if they are compatible. [118952]

Ms Stuart: There are 18 companies with clinical computer systems in use by general practitioners. In general there is little direct compatibility between the products of these companies. However, current policy, which is supported by the system suppliers, is to migrate these products to industry standard software which will create open and inter-operable systems which in turn will facilitate more automated sharing of information.

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure the compatibility of computer systems used in hospitals with those used by general practitioners. [118951]

Ms Stuart: The information strategy for the Modern National Health Service 1998–2005 "Information for Health" is aimed at focusing the development of information technology systems to facilitate the delivery of integrated care. A number of specific initiatives are taking place to ensure compatibility of computer systems used in hospitals with those used by general practitioners:

The establishment of a national clinical information standards board with responsibility to deliver agreed standards for communicating clinical information between clinicians in primary and secondary care;

The development of an agreed framework for helping to structure the thousands of clinical communications which are sent and received every day. A multi-professional group of clinicians have developed a draft framework of headings and accompanying definitions that are being evaluated for this purpose;

The Electronic Record Development and Implementation Programme is currently agreeing a comprehensive programme of work which will address the national requirement for standards to ensure the compatibility of clinical computer systems used in hospitals and primary care;

Work over the next 12 months to support the development of clinical messages to support GP to GP record transfer, referral and discharge.

Insomnia

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* specialist sleep clinics and *(b)* specialist consultants in sleep deprivation there are in the NHS; and what is their geographical distribution. [119031]

Mr. Hutton: Specialist sleep clinics may fall under the remit of several different specialties including General Medicine, Chest/Respiratory Medicine and Otolaryngology. Information is not collected centrally on either the number of specialist sleep clinics nor those clinicians who sub-specialise in sleep problems.

Genetic Data

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce legislation to protect anonymous genetic data obtained in confidence from being exploited by commercial companies without the consent of the patient; and if he will make a statement concerning the Source Informatics judgment. [119524]

Ms Stuart: Genetic data provided in confidence should not normally be disclosed to third parties without the consent of the individual to whom they relate. However, the Court of Appeal ruled in December 1999—the Source Informatics judgment—that once data have been effectively anonymised they are no longer confidential. Although we have no plans to introduce legislation in this area at the present time, the Department is considering whether patient interests and the broader public interest are adequately protected.

We remain concerned about the use of anonymised health data for commercial purposes that may not be in the public interest and have directed the Department to seek leave from the House of Lords to appeal against the Court of Appeal judgment.

Social Services Departments

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many social services departments remain under special monitoring by the Social Services Inspectorate. [119282]

Mr. Hutton: There are 12 councils with social services responsibilities subject to special measures by the Social Services Inspectorate.

Bed Availability

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 12W, on bed availabilities, how soon after 15 May he will announce targets; and if the base line will be set at 1998–99. [119302]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* We shall issue planning guidance for the National Health Service when we publish our response to the National Beds Inquiry consultation. This is likely to be during the summer. The consultation continues until 15 May. No decision has yet been taken about whether to set specific targets for beds as part of the planning guidance.

Prescribed Drugs

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of children aged *(a)* under 10 and *(b)* under 16 years who have been prescribed (i) Ritalin and (ii) Prozac in the past 12 months. [118891]

Ms Stuart: Information on the number of children prescribed Ritalin and Prozac is not collected. Ritalin should be used only in cases where there is a clear diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder following comprehensive assessment by a specialist in childhood behavioural disorders. Given some concern

over the clinical evidence and current levels of prescribing, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence is to consider Ritalin later this year and will issue authoritative advice on its use in routine practice.

Prozac is not licensed for use in children as the safety and efficacy has not been established. Doctors may prescribe medicines outside their licensed indications if they consider that this is in the patient's best interests.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to report on Ritalin; and if his Department has given evidence to its inquiry into Ritalin. [118921]

Ms Stuart: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), a Special Health Authority independent of the Department of Health, is expected to disseminate its guidance on Ritalin to the NHS in October 2000. The Department has not submitted evidence to inform NICE's appraisal, although in accordance with usual practice it has commissioned an independent systematic review of the research evidence on behalf of NICE. The Department of Health will be consulted along with other stakeholders on NICE's draft recommendations.

GM Salmon

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent reports he has received on the safety of genetically modified salmon; and what his policy is on the sale of genetically modified salmon in the UK; [119420]

(2) what information has been received concerning genetically modified salmon bred by A/F Protein Inc.; what European marketing consent exists for such salmon; and what his policy is on licensing the import of genetically modified salmon eggs to the UK. [119421]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* No information has been received concerning genetically modified salmon bred by A/F Protein Inc. nor has any application been made to import these salmon or their eggs.

Neither the salmon or their eggs could be imported into the European Community without approval having first been given under either the EC contained use Directive (90/219), the EC deliberate release Directive (90/220) or the EC novel food regulation (258/97).

Cleft Lip and Palate Patients

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what provisions he has made for the integration into the reorganised treatment facilities of current cleft lip and palate patients. [119318]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* Changes in the delivery of services for cleft lip and/or palate patients will need to take place in a managed way. All surgery will be carried out in the new designated centres when they are established and staff have been appointed. A number of existing units may become "spokes" or "outreach" centres and continue to provide some cleft services in discussion with designated centres.

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met the Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service; and if he will make a statement. [117724]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 13 April 2000]:* The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to become a next steps agency of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) when the FSA was established on 1 April. I have not met the chief executive and have no current plans to do so. I am advised by the FSA however, that the MHS Chief Executive has regular meetings with the Chairman of the FSA (Sir John Krebs).

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if the people of St. Helena will be consulted in the decision-making process on the viability of an airstrip on St. Helena. [119607]

Mr. Foulkes: The St. Helena Government, Councillors, civil society organisations and other stakeholders on the island will be consulted during the comparative study of air and sea access that is expected to start in the middle of this year. The study will identify the most cost-efficient permanent solution to the island's international passenger and cargo transportation needs.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the cost will be of the airstrip feasibility study on St. Helena; who will undertake it; and how long it will take to complete. [119608]

Mr. Foulkes: The comparative study of air and sea access, which will identify the most cost-efficient permanent solution to the island's international passenger and cargo transportation needs, is expected to cost some £150,000. Consultants to undertake the study will be appointed following a competitive tendering exercise. Completion of the study is expected to take an elapsed time of some 14 weeks following mobilisation of the consultants.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when a decision will be reached on the viability of an airstrip on St. Helena. [119609]

Mr. Foulkes: Discussions with the St. Helena Government on the findings of the comparative study of air and sea access will begin once a final report has been produced. Draft Terms of Reference for the study are currently being considered by the St. Helena Government and it is expected that the study, which will have an elapsed time of some 14 weeks, will start in July or August.

Asbestos

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will encourage UK firms engaged in overseas construction projects to prohibit the use of asbestos or materials containing it in their current and future schemes. [119606]

Mr. Foulkes: The prohibition of dangerous substances such as asbestos is a matter for Governments rather than private firms. We are committed to working with our partner countries in their efforts to improve standards of environmental regulation and reverse trends in environmental degradation. This may include advice on the prohibition, use and handling of asbestos.

We also support a proposal from the EC to bring asbestos fibres within the scope of the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade. At present only blue asbestos is covered by the Convention.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will take steps to ensure that no asbestos or materials containing it are used in *(a)* current and *(b)* future projects funded by her Department; and if she will make a statement. [119605]

Mr. Foulkes: Construction standards for buildings built with the Department's assistance in developing countries do not permit the use of asbestos. Occasionally we have assisted with projects involving the modification of buildings which are found to contain asbestos. One such case occurred with the Zimbabwe Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) in the upgrading of air traffic control systems. We introduced specialist technical assistance for DCA staff and contractors to deal with this problem in the short term and be aware of it for the future.

We have also funded research to develop alternatives to asbestos sheets as roofing materials.

Ethiopia

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent estimate she has made of the length of time it takes for food aid from Britain to reach those in need in Ethiopia. [118812]

Mr. Foulkes: Food aid for Britain is provided through NGOs and the World Food Programme. The length of time between purchase and delivery depends considerably on where the food is sourced (much is purchased locally and some comes from the in-country Food Security Reserve) and the accessibility of those in need. The advantages of local produce are mostly in the speed of delivery and the low transport costs.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received from the United Nations concerning the drought in Ethiopia. [118819]

Mr. Foulkes: The United Nations launched an appeal on 28 January 2000 for US$190 million, requesting relief assistance for some 8 million Ethiopians and 250,000 refugees. This included the provision of approximately 250,000 metric tonnes of food aid to assist 2.3 million beneficiaries. Catherine Bertini, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Drought in the Horn of Africa, is visiting Ethiopia from 11–19 April. We await her report.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid agencies operating in Ethiopia are funded by her Department. [118817]

Mr. Foulkes: The following table shows DFID Emergency Funded Interventions through Non Governmental Organisations and international organisations since April 1999.

Period	*Agency*	*Area*	*Food (MT)*	*Non-food*	*Total cost (£)*
June 1999-June 2000 (Extension for capacity building and rubbhall erection)	SCF-UK	Belg producing areas of North and South Wollo, Amhara region	6,000 cereal, 486 famix	6 rubbhalls (mobile storage), 4 nutritional monitoring teams, training	1,498,482
October 1999–February 2000	SOS Sahel	Kindo Koisha Woreda, North Omo Zone, SNNPR	3,000 cereal, 1,000 cereal	No	[1]789,403
January-August 2000	Interaide France	Kindo Koisha Woreda SNNPR	150 famix	Nutritional assessment. Capacity building, nutritional training	92,405
March-August 2000	SCF-UK	Gubaiafto and Wadla Woredas, North Wollo, Amhara region	6,240 cereal	Emergency seed provision	1,482,240
January-July 2000	FARM Africa	Konso Special Woreda, SNNPR	3,700 cereal	Emergency seed provision Woreda and regional level emergency response capacity building	1,098,621
April-September	SOS Sahel	Borana Zone (Yabello, Liben, Arero)	2,500 cereal, 300 pulses, 200,000 litres oil	Emergency water tankering. Set up temporary water storage facilities. Emergency seed provision	1,134,525
April-December 2000	SOS Sahel	Kindo Koisha Woreda, SNNPR	2,900 cereal	Emergency distribution of seeds and planting materials	927,086
April-October 2000	Action Contre La Faim (ACF)	Korahai Zone, SNRS	128.7 supplementary food	—	389,179
2 months April-May 2000	WFP	Bale Zone, Oromiya State	—	To provide truck maintenance and to contribute to road clearance	12,500
2 months April-May 2000	WFP	Beyada Woreda, Amhara state	—	Construction of a road bridge and to improve access for relief supplies	11,250+

[1] Purchased from funds remaining from 1999 allocation

Ethiopia and Mozambique (Aid)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what factors underlay her decision to reduce aid for *(a)* Ethiopia and *(b)* Mozambique. [118815]

Mr. Foulkes: Ethiopia's military expenditure has steadily increased since war broke out with Eritrea in May 1998. This has led to macro-economic strains and a breakdown in relations with the IFIs. In common with other donors, we are meeting existing commitments under our bilateral development programme, but not taking on any new activities, with the exception of food security. Humanitarian assistance is not affected.

We have not decided to reduce aid to Mozambique. This year's Departmental Report estimates spending on the country programme at £21.41 million in 1999–2000. This does not include £15 million provided to help Mozambique to reach Heavily Indebted Poor Countries completion point, or humanitarian aid in response to the floods, for which £20 million has been committed. We expect to increase our spending on the country programme in the current financial year.

Background

Ethiopia

Britain's bilateral development programme is currently running at about £4 million-£5 million a year. We are supporting activities in food security; the roads sector; revenue-raising; preparation of the interim PRSP; and the police. Before the war with Eritrea, we had been ready to deepen our development partnership with the Government of Ethiopia because of their commitment to poverty eradication. Our aim was to provide direct budgetary support to the Government to implement their own plans in the social sectors. We intended to start this with a new contribution of £25 million to help the improvement and extension of primary education throughout the country.

However, since May 1998 when the hostilities broke out and military expenditure increased we have, in common with other donors, not taken on any new activities, with the exception of work on food security. Our planning figures have been adjusted to reflect this: £6 million in each of 2000–01 and 2001–02. Actual expenditure will vary in line with Ethiopia's capacity to end the war and return to the reform agenda it has pursued so strongly in the past. Humanitarian assistance is not affected by this decision. It is provided in response to need and reflects the opportunity to reach those in need and to monitor interventions.

Natural Disasters

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what procedures have been put in place after 1 March to improve the British Government's response to natural disasters abroad. [118814]

Mr. Foulkes: We already have well established and effective procedures to deal with disasters overseas. These are kept under review. We do not consider that any changes are necessary at present.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the services which *(a)* her Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to her Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119438]

Mr. Foulkes: We are collecting data which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. We currently provide a range of services electronically that include: a website containing information on Departmental publications, research data, contract opportunities and vacancies; a Public Inquiry Point staffed by a dedicated team able to provide a direct response or route the inquiry to the most appropriate respondent; all press releases and speeches, publications and publicly available research data issued by the Department which may be ordered electronically or downloaded directly from the website; guidelines and application forms for several DFID funding programmes.

In the public arena we use electronic means to support payment of pensions to ex-colonial pensioners and dependants. Future plans include the introduction of electronic invoices and e-tendering, subject to a successful trial by the Office of Government Commerce. These initiatives are planned to be introduced by 2002 and progress will be monitored as part of the Department's Public Service Agreement. We do not have responsibility for any external agencies.

AIDS 2000 Conference, Durban

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if members of her Department will be attending the AIDS 2000 conference in Durban in July. [119048]

Mr. Foulkes: We attach great importance to the first World AIDS conference to be held in Africa. Officials from the Health and Population Department and advisers based in our Southern Africa office will be attending the conference.

Multilateral Debt Relief

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries she expects to qualify for multilateral debt relief at the end of April, indicating the amount of bilateral debt they each owe to the Exchequer. [118098]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

The countries that have already qualified for relief under the enhanced HIPC initiative are: Bolivia, who owes approximately £17.5 million to the UK's Export Credits Guarantee Department (ECGD); Mauritania, (who owes approximately £7 million to ECGD); Mozambique, (who owes approximately £91 million to ECGD); Tanzania, (who owes approximately £115 million to ECGD); and Uganda (who owes approximately £5.5 million to ECGD).

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

European Court of Human Rights

36. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the implications of recent judgments in the European Court of Human Rights for the role of the Lord Chancellor. [118162]

Mr. Lock: The position of the Lord Chancellor is unaffected by the McGonnell judgment. It is confined to the special position of the bailiff of Guernsey and to his

role in that particular case. The Lord Chancellor has always maintained that the question in every case is whether Article 6 is complied with on the facts. The European Court confirmed this saying:

> The question is whether, in a given case, the requirements of the Convention are met.

Also, the court accepted the Government's submission that neither Article 6 nor any other provision of the Convention required

> states to comply with any theoretical concepts as such.

Safe Cells

37. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many safe cells were installed in courts in the last financial year; and how many will be installed in the current financial year. [118163]

Jane Kennedy: Custody areas in courts are not designed for holding individuals overnight. They do not reflect, therefore, the design requirements of HM Prison Service's improved standard cell. No cells to the improved standard cell design were installed in courts in 1999–2000 or are planned to be installed in 2000–01.

Public Trust Office

38. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received concerning the investments made on behalf of individuals by the Public Trust Office. [118164]

Jane Kennedy: My officials have consulted widely on all aspects of potential change in the Public Trust Office, including the changes to be made to the investment function. Representations have been received from the Public Trust Office's major stakeholders, the Law Society, the judiciary, members of the public, the trade unions and staff. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor made a statement on the future of the Public Trust Office on 11 April.

Magistrates

39. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to ensure that magistrates are drawn from all social and economic classes. [118165]

Jane Kennedy: My hon. Friend will know from previous answers I have given her that the local Advisory Committees are requested by my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor actively to encourage applications from people from all backgrounds, and his officials to monitor with care their success in doing so. A considerable amount of effort in particular is directed towards encouraging people from those sections of the community who historically have not applied. My noble and learned Friend is resolved to ensure that local benches reflect the communities they serve.

Judges

40. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on how many occasions since May 1997 the Lord Chancellor has had cause to reprimand members of the judiciary for inappropriate comments made in court. [118166]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor, as Head of the Judiciary, is responsible for dealing with all matters of judicial conduct. He takes a firm line with any Judge whose behaviour falls short of what both he and the public expects. Since May 1997 there have been five instances where he has had cause to reprimand a Judge for comments made in court.

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Government have to institute a complaints procedure against Judges. [119192]

Jane Kennedy: Procedures for investigating complaints about the personal conduct of Judges are well established. The Lord Chancellor will ask the Judge to comment on the complaint and will study those comments very carefully before sending a full reply. He may also obtain the tape recording or transcript of proceedings or seek the views of others who were present. The Lord Chancellor expects all Judges to uphold the standards of courtesy and consideration which generally exist in British public life. He therefore takes the handling of complaints very seriously.

Given the independence of the judiciary the Lord Chancellor cannot investigate complaints about judicial decisions. If a litigant is dissatisfied with the outcome of a hearing, the remedy is to take legal advice and appeal to a superior court if so advised.

Social Security Commissioners

41. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made in publishing decisions of the social security commissioners. [118167]

Jane Kennedy: A meeting between representatives from the DSS, Appeals Service and the Court Service Agency took place on 28 March 2000. At the meeting it was agreed that the DSS publications team in Leeds would arrange for publication and distribution of decisions in loose-leaf format with storage binders. Thereafter all decisions will be published and distributed as a package on a quarterly basis with an updated table of contents.

Community Legal Service

42. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on progress with the establishment of the Community Legal Service. [118168]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor officially launched the Community Legal Service (CLS) on 3 April, and it marked:

> the unveiling of the CLS Quality Mark, which is the public symbol of quality assured legal service providers, and has already been awarded to over 6,000 providers;
>
> the publication of the CLS Directory of legal services, which provides details of 15,000 service providers;
>
> the launch of the new CLS website "Just Ask", which carries the CLS Directory of legal services, and has links to several hundred advice sites;

the start of the CLS telephone helpline for those seeking details of local providers;

the announcement that there are now 70 CLS Partnerships covering a third of the population of England and Wales;

the publication of the "Guidance for CLS Partnerships" in draft form for consultation

the publication of the consultation paper "Performance Indicators for CLS partnerships"; and

the announcement that a further £46 million will be spent on legal help, including £23 million of new funding. The extra funds will mean that the Legal Services Commission will expand contracting to enable providers to help more clients.

Criminal Trials

43. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the use of the dock in criminal trials. [118169]

Jane Kennedy: Docks provide security for those in the courtroom as well as adding a degree of formality to the hearing. They provide a practical system that has worked over the years. There are no plans to make any changes to the existing arrangements for adult cases. In the youth court a more informal style may be appropriate such as that in the Inner London Youth Courts where there is no dock. The defendant normally sits with his parent or youth justice worker and lawyer. All parties are at the same level. This can help communication and engage the defendant in the proceedings. That is why my Department and the Home Office have sponsored the youth demonstration projects in Leicestershire with Rutland and in Rotherham. They are independently evaluated programmes that investigate ways in which young offenders, and those responsible for them—parents and family—can be engaged more effectively in the court process. The programmes are also exploring the potential benefits of greater transparency in the youth justice process, physical and environmental changes, and more feedback to justices on the effect of their sentencing. The projects are being evaluated by Sheffield University, and the findings will be used to inform good practice advice for all youth courts later this year.

Trial by Jury

44. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the impact of proposed reforms of trial by jury on the operation of magistrates courts. [118170]

Jane Kennedy: We estimate that there will be an additional 12,000 cases to be handled in the magistrates courts as a result of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) No. 2 Bill.

SCOTLAND

Drug Deaths

7. **Mrs. Spelman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action his Department is taking in relation to the increase in the number of drug deaths in Scotland. [118132]

13. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures his Department is undertaking to combat the increase in drug deaths in Scotland. [118138]

Mr. Wilson: Responsibility for action to prevent drug-related deaths lies with the Scottish Executive, working within the common UK-wide statutory framework.

Reduction of drug-related deaths is a key objective of Scotland's drug strategy.

Shipbuilding (Apprenticeships)

8. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the number of apprenticeships in the shipbuilding industry *(a)* currently, *(b)* in April 1990 and *(c)* in April 1980. [118133]

Dr. Reid: Information from the Engineering and Marine Training Authority indicates that there are currently 134 Modern Apprentices training in the shipbuilding industry in Scotland compared with approximately 200 in 1990 and a similar number in 1980.

Responsibility for the development of training programmes in Scotland, including the Modern Apprenticeship scheme, is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

Minimum Wage

9. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many enforcement actions have been taken in Scotland to ensure that employers pay the national minimum wage. [118134]

Dr. Reid: Since the introduction of the national minimum wage on 1 April 1999, National Minimum Wage inspectors in Scotland have received 279 complaints and issued 12 enforcement notices.

12. **Ms Squire:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the enforcement of the minimum wage. [118137]

Dr. Reid: Enforcement of the national minimum wage has been a success. Since the introduction of the national minimum wage on 1 April last year, minimum wage inspectors in Scotland have received 279 complaints and issued 12 enforcement notices. The Inland Revenue's national minimum wage inspectors have recovered some £1.25 million of underpayments for low-paid workers across the UK. The message is getting across that inspectors will use their powers to pursue non-complying employers. However, I am pleased that the majority of employers have responded well to the introduction of the minimum wage which benefits some 100,000 workers in Scotland.

Employment

10. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on employment levels in Scotland. [118135]

Dr. Reid: Latest data show that employment in Scotland stood at 2,324,000 as at November 1999 to January 2000, around its highest level since 1966.

18. **Mr. McFall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the prospects for employment in Scotland. [118143]

25. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the prospects for employment in Scotland. [118150]

Dr. Reid: The prospects for employment in Scotland are good. The three main independent forecasters (Fraser of Allander Institute, Business Strategies Ltd. and Cambridge Econometrics) expect employment in Scotland, which is currently at around its highest level since 1966, to rise in each year between 2000 and 2002.

Asylum Seekers

11. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department regarding the dispersal of refugees and asylum seekers throughout the United Kingdom. [118136]

Dr. Reid: I have regular discussions with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to discuss various matters.

21. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the current number of asylum seekers and refugees placed in Scotland. [118146]

Dr. Reid: As at 28 January 2000, the most recent date for which figures are available, 610 asylum seekers were being supported by local authorities in Scotland.

In addition, about 250 of the refugees from Kosovo who came to Scotland in 1999 under the Kosovo Humanitarian Evacuation Programme currently remain in Scotland.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many asylum seekers have registered with each local authority in Scotland at the most recent date for which figures are available. [117658]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 4 April 2000]:* As at 28 January 2000, the most recent date for which figures are available (from claim forms submitted by local authorities), the number of asylum seekers being supported by local authorities in Scotland were as follows:

Local authority	*Number of asylum seekers*
Aberdeen City	18
Aberdeenshire	2
Argyll and Bute	1
Dumfries and Galloway	2
Dundee City	8
East Renfrewshire	6
Edinburgh, City of	308
Fife	11
Glasgow City	225
Midlothian	2
North Lanarkshire	15
Renfrewshire	3
South Ayrshire	1
South Lanarkshire	2
Stirling	4
West Dunbartonshire	1
West Lothian	1

East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, Falkirk and Highland also assisted asylum seekers during the year, but were not doing so at 28 January.

Student Finances

14. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent representations he has received about student finances and tuition fees. [118139]

Mr. Wilson: I have received representations on a wide range of issues including student finance and tuition fees.

Winter Fuel Payments

15. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many Scottish pensioners will benefit from the new rates for winter fuel payments. [118140]

Dr. Reid: Over 900,000 Scottish pensioners will benefit from the increase in the Winter Fuel Payment from £100 to £150. In addition the age of eligibility for payments is being equalised at 60. We estimate that in Scotland up to an extra 150,000 people will be eligible for the payments from next winter.

Coalfields

16. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action he is taking to regenerate coalfield communities in Scotland. [118141]

Dr. Reid: The Coalfields Regeneration Trust was established following the recommendations of the Coalfields Task Force Report, commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

Implementation of the Task Force's recommendations in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Executive. The Scottish Executive Deputy Minister for Communities announced an allocation of £4.5 million funding over three years for Scotland last month.

Postal Services

17. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps are being taken to improve postal services in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [118142]

Mr. Wilson: This Government remain determined to ensure that the Post Office is better equipped to serve all its customers in every part of the country, as signalled in the Postal Services Bill.

The Government are also committed to helping the Post Office to meet the changing needs of its customers. All post offices, including those in Scotland, will benefit from the £480 million computerisation programme due to be completed by 2001.

Harris Tweed Industry

19. **Mr. Macdonald:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his recent discussions with other Departments about assistance for the Harris Tweed industry. [118144]

Mr. Wilson: I am in regular discussion with the Scottish Executive and British Trade International about assisting the Harris Tweed industry in promoting and marketing its product, particularly overseas. We are also planning a major PR event for the industry to be held at Dover House later this year.

In the meantime, the consultants retained by Western Isles Enterprise on duty rates have spent the last few months lobbying influential US business organisations to enlist support for the Harris Tweed Authority's bid to amend their preferential tariff to encompass double-width cloth. They have encountered no objections to this move.

Student Support

20. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what consultations he has had with colleagues in England concerning student support following the publication of the Quigley report. [118145]

Mr. Wilson: I have regular contact with colleagues in other Departments about a wide range of issues.

Representation

22. **Mr. Donohoe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will bring forward plans to change the system of representation on the added members list. [118147]

Dr. Reid: We have no plans to change the system of representation on the added members list. The purpose of the additional members is to ensure that the number of seats won by each party in the Parliament more accurately reflect the votes cast for those parties. That can only be done when both constituency and regional votes are cast on the same day.

NHS Computer Records

23. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures he has taken to ensure that computer records held by the NHS in Scotland are compatible with records held throughout the United Kingdom. [118148]

Dr. Reid: The administration of the NHS in Scotland is a devolved matter for the Scottish Executive. My role is to ensure that, where necessary, good and effective liaison takes place between the Executive and the Department of Health.

Economy

24. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of the trade unions and the business community to discuss the Scottish economy; and if he will make a statement. [118149]

Dr. Reid: I meet regularly with representatives of the trade unions and the business community to discuss a wide range of issues. I had the pleasure of attending and addressing the Annual Congress of the STUC in Edinburgh yesterday.

Forth Railway Bridge

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list his Department's responsibilities in relation to the care and maintenance of the Forth railway bridge. [118131]

Mr. Wilson: Responsibility for care and maintenance of the Forth Railway Bridge rests with Railtrack. The Rail Regulator is responsible for ensuring that Railtrack complies with its obligations under the Railways (Safety Cases) Regulations 1994 and with other legal obligations in relation to the safety of the bridge and its operations.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND

Devolution

28. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Advocate-General how many devolution-related issues have been raised with her in the last month; and what subjects they have been concerned with. [118153]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: During the month from 11 March to 11 April there were 102 devolution notices intimated to me. Broadly the notices can be divided into nine subjects—delays in trials, lack of access to a solicitor, legal aid questions, temporary sheriffs, cases under the Road Traffic Act, hearsay evidence, covert police operations, confiscation proceedings and civil cases.

European Convention on Human Rights

29. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Advocate-General what steps she is taking to inform UK Government Departments of Scottish experience in applying the European convention on human rights since devolution. [118154]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I have already visited a number of Government Departments to discuss matters, including the Scottish experience of Convention rights, with their legal advisers; and intend to continue to do so. Lawyers in my Department also have frequent discussions at official level with their counterparts in UK Departments on these issues.

30. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Advocate-General if she will visit The Hague to discuss the operation of the European convention on human rights. [118155]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: At present I have no plans to do so.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

GM Materials

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent research his Department has carried out into the effects on the food chain of animals eating foods containing genetically modified materials. [119015]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that there is no evidence to suggest that animals digest feed containing modified genetic material any differently from animal feed containing non-modified genetic material. Relevant work has considered the effects of the processing of materials used in animal feed to determine the extent to which genetic material is disrupted. One such project is due to be reported to the Food Standards Agency in the next few weeks. We also understand that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is considering a proposed project to establish the pathways of DNA from genetically modified material.

Pork (Labelling)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken since March

1999 to ensure that British pork is labelled so that it can be distinguished from imported pork packaged in the United Kingdom. [117397]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

On 1 February the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food issued tough new guidance to industry and enforcement authorities emphasising the need to ensure that country of origin markings on food labels are unambiguous. The guidelines make it clear that, under current legislation which protects consumers from misleading presentation of foods, imported pork packaged in Great Britain should not be labelled as "British".

Fishing

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what rules he has set Financial Fisheries Guidance grant and European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund applicants from Objective 1 regions. [119346]

Mr. Morley: The European Commission has yet to agree the Single Programming Document for the Cornwall and the Scilly Isles Objective 1 area, including the proposed priorities and measures funded through the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (Guidance). Rules for applicants will be finalised following Commission approval and consistently with the relevant European Regulations.

Personal Documentation

Mr. Caton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what purposes his Department and its executive agencies require a birth certificate to be furnished by *(a)* employees, *(b)* contractors, *(c)* those applying for employment or contracts and (b) other persons. [118773]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) on 8 June 1999, *Official Report*, columns 252–53W.

Organic Food

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the annual turnover of the organic food sector was in the last financial year for which figures are available and what percentage this represented of *(a)* the turnover of the agricultural sector and *(b)* GDP. [118567]

Mr. Morley: The farmgate value of organic food production in the UK in the period April 1998 to April 1999 is estimated to have been around £51 million. This represented 0.3 per cent. of the UK agricultural gross output and 0.003 per cent. of GDP.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 19 April 2000

DEFENCE

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received regarding co-operation between the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency and the NXT. [117844]

Dr. Moonie: No representations regarding co-operation between the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) and NXT have been addressed to DERA and I am not aware that any representations have been received elsewhere in the Department.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will estimate the sums to be spent each year on the new carriers until they enter service; [118265]

(2) if he will estimate the annual operating costs of each of the new carriers. [118268]

Mr. Hoon: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 19 April 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence asking for estimates of the sums to be spent each year on the new carriers until they enter service and their annual operating costs. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Our estimates of annual procurement costs for the new carriers are projections of equipment costs for internal planning purposes and furthermore their disclosure could damage the competitive process. I am therefore withholding the information requested under exemptions 2 and 7a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. As to operating costs, annual estimates for the support of the carriers have still to be established.

I am able to confirm, however, that the estimated total procurement cost of the future carriers is broadly £2Bn with operating and support costs of around £3.5Bn over the life of the programme. Both these figures are at 1999 prices.

Roll-on/Roll-off Ferries

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the basis was for his Department's statements concerning the inability of UK yards to design and build roll-on/roll-off ferries to meet his Department's known requirements. [118899]

Mr. Hoon: The statement in the press on 28 March attributed to an MOD spokesman was taken out of context. The Ministry of Defence press office issued a statement that day making it clear that it did not represent my view, nor that of the Ministry of Defence and that there was no reason why British shipyards should not be able to bid competitively for roll-on roll-off ferry work either in the UK or abroad.

The Government have encouraged consortiums bidding for the MOD sealift contract to look to UK shipyards. Bids are still being considered and we expect a decision to be taken in the late spring.

Western European Union

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with the President of the Western European Union; and what issues were discussed. [119589]

Mr. Hoon: The "Presidency" of the Western European Union is currently held by Portugal, who also currently hold the Presidency of the European Union. I have met my Portuguese counterpart in his EU capacity where we discussed future arrangements for European Defence—but we have not met in his WEU capacity.

The senior appointment in the WEU, that of the Secretary General, is held by Javier Solana, who is also currently the High Representative for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. I have met with Snr. Solana in his EU capacity where we discussed future arrangements for European Defence—but have not met him in his purely WEU capacity.

I have not yet met the President of the Western European Union Assembly, Klaus Bühler.

Defence Analytical Services Agency

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Defence Analytical Services Agency for 2000–01. [120180]

Mr. Spellar: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency for the financial year 2000–01. The targets build on the progress already made by the Agency since it was formed in 1992 and are as follows:

Delivery of Customer Service

The majority of the Agency's business is covered by Service Level Agreements with customers, which set out the targets for timeliness and quality of work. For those parts of the business where Service Level Agreements are not appropriate, project agreements are in place. The Agency is committed to continuous improvement in the range and quality of the services it provides to customers. Key targets are:

a. To meet at least 95 per cent. of the timeliness and quality targets set in Service Level Agreements and project agreements.

b. To have at least 90 per cent. of customers saying they are at least satisfied with the timeliness, quality of work and helpfulness of staff in the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey.

c. To have at least 25 per cent. of customers who received DASA services in 1999–2000 and 2000–01 report an improvement in services provided in the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey.

Efficiency and Quality

The Agency plans to make efficiency savings in 2000–01 as well as continuing to meet the additional demands placed upon it by new Departmental studies and initiatives. DASA is part of the Government Statistical Service and will play its part in

implementing "National Statistics"—the Government's policy on improving the integrity, quality and freedom from political interference of official statistics. Key targets are:

a. To make all of DASA's unclassified National Statistics publications available on the MOD Intranet and the DASA internet websites.

b. To conduct a review of the production and publication of armed forces and MOD civilian personnel statistics against National Statistics quality standards.

c. To deliver efficiency savings with a value of 2.2 per cent. of the initial running cost allocation.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

EU Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Luxembourg on 17 to 18 April; and if he will make a statement. [119918]

Ms Quin: I represented the UK at the Agriculture Council meeting in Luxembourg on 17 April.

The Council reached political agreement by qualified majority (only Denmark expressing dissent) on a Community wide system of rules for the compulsory labelling of beef. The first stage of the scheme—providing for most beef sold to consumers to show the member state where it was slaughtered and cut/deboned and the approval numbers of the relevant establishments—should come into effect on 1 September 2000. The second stage, coming into effect on 1 January 2002, will additionally require labelling by reference to country of origin. I welcomed this agreement which will ensure British consumers can look forward to clearer, more informative labelling on beef. The agreement will now be put to the European Parliament for its consideration with a view to adoption of a Regulation before 1 September.

Commissioner Franz Fischler reported the latest developments in the WTO agriculture negotiations in Geneva. Along with many other Ministers, I welcomed the start of negotiations and encouraged the Commission to continue its efforts to facilitate the launch of a new Round of comprehensive trade negotiations and to continue pursuing a constructive line in the agriculture negotiations in accordance with the Council mandate agreed last autumn.

Under Other Business, I raised concerns about the impact on British millers of the operation of a WTO concession permitting the import of maize from third countries into Spain and Portugal at reduced duty rates. Originally intended to cover maize for animal feed, an increasing proportion was being imported as flint maize which is used for processing into breakfast cereals. This was distorting the single market to the detriment of millers in the UK and other northern member states. Commissioner Fischler undertook to try to resolve this problem with the main exporting countries in time for the next marketing year.

Organic Food

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research assistance his Department gives to the *(a)* organic and *(b)* biotechnology sectors to help them establish the safety of their products. [118582]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply, as responsibility for food safety and standards matters has now passed to the Food Standards Agency (FSA) which reports to Parliament through Health Ministers.

The FSA funds extensive independent research programmes to support and further its aim of protecting public health from risks which could arise from the consumption of food. The results of these are made widely available to all sectors of the food industry via scientific literature, and from the agency on request, to assist them in ensuring that the food that they are supplying does not pose an unacceptable risk to health. The availability of the results is also publicised in the Agency's Food Safety Information Bulletin when the work has been completed.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Factory Inspections

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many factory inspection visits on average *(a)* a principal inspector of health and safety and *(b)* a qualified inspector of health and safety, in a field office of the Field Operations Directorate of the Health and Safety Executive made in the last financial year. [118408]

Mr. Meacher: The information requested cannot be produced at this time, because full-year data on inspectors' work for the year ended 31 March 2000 are not yet available and HSE's recording system does not make any distinction between factory inspection visits and inspection visits to other types of premises by Field Operations Directorate Inspections.

In 1998–99 Field Operations Directorate inspectors carried out the number of inspection contacts shown in the following table.

The average number of inspection contacts completed, in 1998–99, by HSE Field Operations Directorate inspectors in operations groups

	Number
Principal inspector	33
Qualified inspector	160

Gas Safety Review

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Review of Gas Safety will be published. [118904]

Mr. Meacher: I anticipate receiving the findings and conclusions of the Health and Safety Commission on its review of gas safety in the summer. These findings will be publicised thereafter. Consequential legislative changes would be subject to the Commission's normal consultative process.

Canals

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which canal structures will be affected by British Waterways restoration plans. [119097]

Mr. Mullin: British Waterways have a number of restoration projects in hand, each of which may affect canal structures. The hon. Member may wish to write to my noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for Inland Waterways if there are specific plans of concern to him.

Trunk Road Network

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the 10 largest urban areas by population in England which are more than six miles distant from a trunk road. [119180]

Mr. Hill: The list is as follows (in descending order of population):

Southend-on-sea/Raleigh/Shoeburyness
Margate/Ramsgate/Broadstairs
Basildon
Torquay/Paignton
Harrogate
Weymouth
Clacton
Canvey Island
Braintree
Bridlington.

In the July 1998 paper, "A new deal for trunk roads in England", the Government announced their intention to transfer to local authorities responsibility for approximately 40 per cent. of the current trunk road network. When implemented, this will increase the number of urban areas more than six miles distant from a trunk road.

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information he provided to his Japanese counterpart in respect of British Nuclear Fuels during his meeting in Japan on 8 and 9 April; if he will place in the Library copies of the documentation given to Japanese authorities on MOX plutonium fuel in connection with the meeting; and if he will make a statement on the outcome of the meeting. [119136]

Mr. Prescott: I was in Japan to attend the G8 Environment Ministers meeting at Otsu from Friday 7 April to Sunday 9 April, and I am placing a copy of the communiqué issued at the end of the meeting in the House of Commons Library. There was no discussion of British Nuclear Fuels during this meeting.

After the G8 meeting, I travelled to Tokyo and met the new Japanese Prime Minister Mori on 10 April. I expressed the UK Government's regret at the problems recently caused by BNFL and assured him that the Government would give the highest priority to sorting these out.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119506]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department at column 509W.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the compatibility of the data matching activities of *(a)* the Audit Commission and *(b)* local authorities in respect of benefit fraud with Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998; what representations he or the Commission have received on this subject; and if he will make a statement. [119526]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is the responsibility of the independent Audit Commission and local authorities to ensure that their data-matching activities conform to Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998. The Commission's legal advice is that the data-matching techniques, which it uses with local authorities, do so conform, and it is continuing discussions on these techniques and their implications with the Information Commissioner.

We are not aware of any representations about the Human Rights Act and the data-matching activities of the Audit Commission or local authorities.

Sewage Treatment Facilities

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the operation of legislation to ensure that water companies do not save costs by switching off sewage treatment facilities at the risk of increasing pollution levels in coastal waters. [119580]

Mr. Mullin: Legislation provides powers for the Environment Agency to set conditions in consents for water company discharges so that necessary water quality standards are met. Where disinfection processes are in place, the Environment Agency requires disinfection over the whole year except where there are no clear benefits to ecological or human interests. The Environment Agency has powers to prosecute water companies in breach of consent conditions.

Old Vehicles

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to restrict the use of vehicles over 10 years old on British roads. [119755]

Mr. Hill: The Department has no plans to restrict the use of vehicles over 10 years old.

Driving Test

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to include motorway driving in the driving test. [119756]

Mr. Hill: We have no plans to include motorway driving in the driving test. We include high-speed dual carriageways in driving test routes wherever possible, which require similar driving skills to motorways, and we examine knowledge of motorway rules in the theory test.

The introduction of moving image hazard perception testing, in 2002, will offer us a further opportunity to test the skills needed to drive safely on motorways.

Road Noise

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he has set targets for the Highways Agency for noise reduction and the use of noise-reducing surfaces; and if he will make a statement; [119760]

(2) if he will make a statement on his policy on reducing noise from trunk roads and motorways. [119761]

Mr. Hill: The Government set out their policy towards dealing with the problems of traffic noise on roads managed by the Highways Agency in "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England". In addition to the increased use of quieter surfaces both for new roads and for roads needing maintenance, we proposed to set aside a budget for the Highways Agency to provide additional mitigation in the worst cases where no other action was being taken. The budget and qualifying criteria were announced on 22 March 1999 and a letter from the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency listing locations which would be subject to a detailed investigation of feasible measures was published in the 11 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 681–83.

For 2000–01, the Government have set a target for the Highways Agency to treat 10 sites from this list. Targets for future years will be reviewed in the light of progress.

I have not set any target for the use of quieter road surfaces in general because the Highways Agency routinely considers their use in all cases where a trunk road needs to be re-surfaced. The Highways Agency currently uses quieter materials for approximately 80 per cent. of the total amount of resurfacing undertaken.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the compensation payments made to residents in the proximity of the M25 for excessive road noise. [119762]

Mr. Hill: Details of individual settlements between the Highways Agency and the claimants are confidential. However, the overall compensation paid since 1 January 1995 to date under Part 1 of the Land Compensation Act 1973 for noise and other factors is £24,213,027.

It is not possible to provide information on payments prior to this date as our records are not specific to schemes.

French Lorry Drivers' Dispute

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if all claims relating to the French lorry drivers' dispute in 1997 have been settled. [119740]

Mr. Hill: We are not aware of any claims in respect of disputes in 1997. We understand, however, that all claims in respect of the lengthy blockade in November 1996 have now been processed by the French authorities, and payment agreed in the case of all eligible claims. This has been achieved after sustained effort over many months by staff in the Department and in the British Embassy in Paris.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish the consultation paper on the management and disposal of nuclear waste referred to in the Government's response of October 1999 to the Lords Science and Technology Committee report on Management of Nuclear Waste (HL 41, 1998–99); and if he will make a statement. [119727]

Mr. Meacher: We aim to publish the consultation paper on the management of radioactive waste when it is ready.

The consultation paper will set out the procedures the Government intend to follow in order to choose and implement its radioactive waste management policy. It will not endorse deep disposal or any other management option.

Copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

Local Deprivation Index

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the representations he has received from local authorities which were in favour of the new proposals on the index of local deprivation were from *(a)* district councils, *(b)* county councils and *(c)* metropolitan authorities; and if he will make a statement. [120030]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The responses which were in favour of the new proposals were from the following: 24 district councils; 20 county councils; 12 metropolitan authorities outside London; five London boroughs; eight unitary authorities and 20 'others' including several development partnerships.

Road Accidents (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many road *(a)* fatalities and *(b)* personal injury accidents took place in Greater London during 1999. [119809]

Mr. Hill: The information requested on personal injury accidents is not available. However, provisional estimates of road casualties for the first nine months of 1999 are given in the table.

Casualties in road accidents in Greater London January-September 1999

Severity of casualty	*Number (provisional)*
Fatal	196
Seriously injured	4,224
Slightly injured	29,056
Total	33,476

Source:
London Accident Analysis Unit

Concessionary Travel Passes

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage the use of concessionary travel passes for retired people which can be used throughout the UK; and if he will make a statement. [119810]

Mr. Hill: Both the train operating companies and the National Express coach company already offer commercial discount cards for nation-wide travel by senior citizens. I would be interested in similar proposals from the bus industry.

The Transport Bill at present before Parliament contains provisions to guarantee that all elderly people will be entitled to at least half-price travel on local buses; the associated bus pass will be free of charge. These measures will bring benefit to many pensioners and will be particularly welcome in areas where at present the local authority offers a less generous concessionary fare scheme, or none at all.

At present schemes often cover only the area of the issuing local authority, but it will remain possible for local authorities to arrange travel outside their own area, as many do.

Leasehold Reform

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress with leasehold reform. [119805]

Mr. Mullin: As was announced in the Gracious Speech given on 17 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 4–7, we intend to publish a draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill for consultation during this session. My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning announced the publication of a summary of the main leasehold measures we intend to include in the draft Bill on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 345W. Copies were placed in the Library. Following consultation on the draft Bill, we intend to bring forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that mobile phone companies and local authorities undertake adequate public consultation before the erection of mobile phone masts. [119463]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is important that the public has an opportunity to comment on the proposed installation of telecommunications masts. Where it is proposed to erect a mast subject to a planning application, the statutory requirement for a local authority to publicise any planning application will apply. In respect of mast development carried out under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (GPDO), under the 42 day prior approval procedure, the operator is required to erect a site notice to publicise the development proposed, in order to provide the public with a clear opportunity to comment to the local planning authority on the siting and appearance of the proposed mast.

The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, set up at the instigation of the Government and chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, is currently considering the possible health effects of the use of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters and is conducting a comprehensive assessment of existing research. The Group is expected to finalise its report shortly. The Government will consider the Group's recommendations and issue a response.

Rail Services

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of Railtrack's figure for the investment needed to improve rail services and safety in Britain. [119458]

Mr. Hill: The Government have made clear that substantial sums will have to be invested in railway infrastructure to deliver the increased rail capacity and quality needed for the future. We will be publishing in the summer our 10-year plan for transport, which will set out indicative plans for transport expenditure, building on the advice of the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority, and responses of the Rail Regulator and others to Railtrack's 2000 Network Management Statement.

The process of reviewing the 2000 Network Management Statement is carried out by the Rail Regulator. He announced on 30 March 2000 that he would be consulting with the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority, PTEs and train operators, to determine in particular whether the plans meet their needs and aspirations.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with Railtrack regarding future levels of investment in railways, with particular reference to the West Coast Main Line and railways in the North-west. [119459]

Mr. Hill: A group consisting of officials from the shadow Strategic Rail Authority (sSRA), the Office of the Rail Regulator, Railtrack and the train operators involved in the West Coast Main Line, both passenger and freight, has been established and meets regularly. The sSRA reports to Ministers as necessary. Railtrack has confirmed that it is on course to meet its contractual commitments to Virgin in 2002 and 2005. The Rail Regulator has published a draft final order he proposes to make, which would require Railtrack to produce robust plans which demonstrate that it can in fact do so, and that it can meet the reasonable requirements of other train operators and funders including the sSRA. The sSRA has input into all development plans for the railways via consultation with Railtrack, both on a formal and, on an informal basis.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussion he has had with Railtrack since the Paddington disaster with regard to reducing the possibility of signals 109 Ladbroke Grove, S862 Swinton Manchester, MP503 Ordsall Lane Manchester, MP324 Ardwick Junction Manchester Piccadilly, MP332 Ardwick Junction, North Manchester and MP64 Lonsight Manchester being passed at danger; and what action has been taken. [119460]

Mr. Hill: After the accident at Ladbroke Grove, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) issued one prohibition notice and two improvement notices to Railtrack requiring them to reduce the risk of the signals listed being passed at danger. Since then, the HSE has been in detailed discussion with Railtrack about these signals. As a result, Railtrack has been given until 22 May 2000 to implement an action plan for reducing the risk of these signals being passed at danger.

In addition, one of the measures agreed at the Deputy Prime Minister's Rail Safety Summit last November was a common standard for reporting and investigating signals passed at danger (SPADs) which has been in operation since December 1999. It was also announced that Railtrack will aim to complete the fitting of the train protection and warning system (TPWS) on its infrastructure (12,000 sites) by the end of 2002, a year earlier than planned, beginning with the highest risk locations. Train operators have committed to fit 33 per cent. of trains with TPWS by the end of 2001, 75 per cent. of trains by the end of 2002 and all trains by the end of 2003.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for jythe Environment, Transport and the Regions what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119546]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The DETR's policy for its main website complies with the Cabinet Office's framework policy and guidelines for the use, management and design of public sector websites. These form part of the e-government strategy (formerly known as the Government corporate IT strategy). Copies of this document are available from the Library of the House.

DETR's main website has not so far carried any advertising nor been sponsored by companies. Were we to accept sponsorship, it would be subject to the policy for other forms of publication, which is in line with the Cabinet Office note "Guidance for Departments on Sponsorship", May 1997. Copies of this document are also available from the Library of the House.

Above all, acknowledgement of any sponsorship would not imply any endorsement of the sponsor's goods or services, nor be open to misinterpretation as influencing policy making.

It will take longer to gather information requested in respect of the Department's Agencies and NDPBs. I will write to the hon. Member with this information and place a copy in the Library in due course.

Royal Train

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions since 1998 *(a)* the sleeping cars and *(b)* the rest of the Royal Train have been hired out to (i) Government departments and (ii) commercial undertakings; and if he will make a statement. [119852]

Mr. Hill: The Train has been used once for official Government business since 1998—for a function hosted by Mrs. Blair for the wives of the G8 Heads of Government on 16 May 1998. The Train, including sleeping cars, has not been hired out to any commercial undertakings during this period. The Train is available for use by Government departments and appropriate organisations, on a reimbursable basis.

Council Tax

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many properties in the Ribble Valley, Pendle, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Rossendale and Hyndburn are in council tax bands *(a)* A and *(b)* H; and what percentage of the total number of properties in each council area this represents. [119849]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested is given in the table. The number of dwellings in bands A and H are as shown on the Valuation List for the authority on 15 October 1999.

	Band A		*Band H*	
	Number	*% of total*	*Number*	*% of total*
Ribble Valley	3,022	13.2	181	0.8
Pendle	24,427	64.8	48	0.1
Blackburn with Darwen	36,692	62.8	63	0.1
Burnley	26,184	64.5	17	0.04
Rossendale	15,613	54.0	39	0.1
Hyndburn	21,624	61.3	12	0.03

Car Number Plates

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to enable the Union Flag to be printed on car number plates; and if he will make a statement. [119774]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Member to the announcement made by my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State on 30 March, copies of which were placed in the Libraries of both Houses, on our proposed number plate regulations. These included the optional display of the GB national identifier on a blue background on the left edge of the plate, an option which dispenses with the need for "GB sticker" when travelling in Europe. We have no plans for other symbols to be included on number plates. People are free to decorate their vehicles with such flags, designs or messages they choose, providing they do not obscure their vision or the number plate.

Water Charges

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria water authorities may use when calculating water charges; and if he will make a statement. [119772]

Mr. Mullin: Except as provided otherwise, a water company, under section 142 of the Water Industry Act 1991, may fix charges by reference to such matters and may adopt such methods and principles for the calculation and imposition of the charges as appear to them to be appropriate. This discretion is governed by specific conditions set by the Director General of Water Services in companies' instruments of appointment, notably the price limits and a prohibition on undue discrimination and undue preference in charging.

Provisions of the Water Industry Act 1999 now in force introduce additional restrictions on water companies' powers to set charges. All household charges must now be set out in charges schemes approved by the Director General, who must have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State. The 1999 Act also introduced new rights of choice for household customers in their method of charging and regulations protecting vulnerable groups against high measured charges. The Secretary of State's guidance, the texts of regulations made under the 1999 Act and other background on water charging policy is set out in "Water Industry Act 1999—Delivering the Government's Objectives" published on 3 February, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Nuclear Fuel (Transport)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with British Nuclear Fuels in respect of its plans to increase the maximum speed of transportation of spent nuclear fuels on the railways. [120043]

Mr. Hill: Discussions take place between my officials and representatives of BNFL on a regular basis. On several of these occasions over the past few years the issue of the maximum speed of transportation of spent nuclear fuels on the railways has been raised. To date there has been no change in the speed limit, and such a change would only be permitted after agreement by all the appropriate safety regulators.

Wind Farms

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what consents are necessary from his and other Government Departments and agencies for the construction and operation of an *(a)* onshore and *(b)* offshore wind farm; and if he will make a statement. [119924]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The position is:

(a) An onshore wind farm needs planning permission under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

(b) An offshore wind farm requires either an Order made by the relevant Secretary of State under the Transport and Works Act 1992, or navigation consent under Section 34 of the Coast Protection Act 1949 and a licence from the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food under the Food and Environmental Protection Act 1985 for the placing of materials in the sea or on the sea-bed. Wind farms within UK waters also require a licence from the Crown Estate Commissioners as owners of the sea-bed. Wind-energy developments with a capacity greater than 50MW also require consent under Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989.

Drinking Water Regulations

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he is taking to revise drinking water regulations in England, following the requirement to implement the new EC Drinking Water Directive by December 2003. [120067]

Mr. Mullin: My Department has today issued a consultation paper setting out proposals to bring standards for drinking water supplied by English water companies into line with those set out in the new EC Drinking Water Directive. Responses are invited by 30 June 2000.

The quality of drinking water is a vital element of public health. Its overall quality in England and Wales is very high. Of the nearly three million tests carried out on drinking water in 1998, 99.78 per cent. met the required standard. The new regulations will revise and tighten standards to take account of the latest scientific and medical advice. The most important change proposed is a reduction from 50µg/l to 10µg/l by 2013 in the maximum permitted concentration of lead in drinking water. This change is in accordance with the latest World Health Organisation guidelines and is introduced primarily to protect unborn children and infants. Neuro toxic effects from exposure to excessive levels of lead are known to contribute to problems in learning and behaviour and to slightly lower IQs.

Executive Agency Targets

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets he has set for the Rent Service. [120068]

Mr. Mullin: Key targets have been agreed for the Agency. They are included in the Agency's Business Plan, which includes management objectives, performance indicators and key tasks. Copies of the Business Plan will be placed in the Library in due course.

The key targets for the Rent Service are:

to increase the number of cases determined per employee by a minimum of 5 per cent. per year while reducing the cost per case by a minimum of 5 per cent. per year in real terms, with no reduction in the quality of service provided;

to deliver Statutory performance targets in 95 per cent. of cases;

to achieve the following customer service targets against Housing Benefit applications:

- process 80 per cent. of Determinations without an inspection within three working days,
- process 70 per cent. of Determinations with an inspection within 15 working days,
- process 80 per cent. of Pre-Tenancy Determinations within four working days,
- process 50 per cent. of Redeterminations within 15 working days;
- process 80 per cent. of Fair Rent Determinations within 40 working days;
- complete 99 per cent. of Housing Renovation Grant valuations within 40 working days.

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what performance targets he has set Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre Executive Agency for 2000–01. [120279]

Mr. Hill: The Agency's principal financial target for 2000–01 is to achieve a minimum contribution to the Exchequer of £1,450,000.

Operational targets have been set to increase occupancy of the three key conference areas as follows: Churchill Auditorium to 225 days; Fleming Room to 225 days; Mountbatten Room to 225 days.

The Agency is also being required to achieve eight new banqueting events, and has the following quality of service targets:

overall score for quality of staff 82 per cent.

overall score for customer satisfaction 85 per cent.

overall score for quality of venue 78 per cent.

overall score for value for money 70 per cent.

the number of complaints received to be less than two per 100 events

an average response time when answering complaints of less than four working days.

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets he has set for the *(a)* Driving Standards Agency, *(b)* Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, *(c)* Vehicle Certification Agency and *(d)* the Vehicle Inspectorate. [120280]

Mr. Hill: Key targets have been set for the agencies. They are included in the agencies' business plans which also include management objectives, performance indicators and key tasks appropriate to the agencies' businesses. Copies of the business plans will be placed in the Library in due course.

The key targets for the Driving Standards Agency are to: contribute to the achievement of a 40 per cent. reduction in riders and drivers killed or seriously injured in road accidents, in the age group up to age 24 years, by 2010 (compared with an average for 1994–98) and to achieve the following customer service targets:

85 per cent. of all customers to be satisfied with the overall level of service received from the Agency.

95 per cent. of candidates to have obtained a theory test appointment at their preferred test centre within two weeks of their preferred date.

The national average practical car test waiting time will be no more than six weeks.

Keep 99.5 per cent. of all theory test appointments, and 99.5 per cent. of practical test appointments that are in place two days prior to the test appointment.

90 per cent. of calls to booking offices will be answered by a human voice in no more than 20 seconds (following routing by the call handling system).

Achieve a 2 per cent. return on capital employed (ROCE) on statutory activities in 2000–01;

not increase fees for statutory activities (unless additional strategic responsibilities are placed on the Agency);

use examiner resource efficiently by achieving an average examiner utilisation for car practical tests of 80 per cent.

The key targets for the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency are to:

make an overall efficiency gain of 2.5 per cent.;

achieve a cost:yield ratio of at least 2.9 to 1 on enforcement (ie recoup £2.90 for every £1 spent);

achieve the following customer service standards;

98 per cent. of Driving Licences issued error-free,

98 per cent. of new Vehicle Registration Documents issued error-free,

97 per cent. of amended Vehicle Registration Documents issued error-free,

ensure the following document turn-round times;

95 per cent. of Ordinary Driving Licences within 10 days,

95 per cent. of first Provisional Licences within nine days,

95 per cent. of Vocational Licences within eight days,

95 per cent. of new Vehicle Registration Documents within 12 days,

95 per cent. of amended Vehicle Registration Documents within 12 days,

answer 94 per cent. of all telephone inquiries within 30 seconds;

answer 96 per cent. of all written inquiries within eight days.

The key targets for the Vehicle Certification Agency are to:

achieve break-even or better on the commercial accounts while achieving at least a 6 per cent. rate of return on capital employed;

have at least 98 per cent. of approval certificates issued error free;

achieve a score of at least 90 per cent. on the quality and service matrix targets shown in the Plan;

ensure that the figure for debtor days is 65 or less;

ensure that invoices for Management System Certification work are issued within an average of 30 days after completion of the chargeable work;

achieve Trading Fund status by 31 March 2001.

The key targets for the Vehicle Inspectorate are to:

meet the quality and general effectiveness levels as specified in the Business Plan measures set for 2000–01;

meet the requirements on levels and types of activity laid down in the Memorandum of Agreement on each Road Transport Enforcement Scheme as agreed with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions;

continue to improve customer focus across VI through the implementation of initiatives in line with the Modernising Government agenda and with particular emphasis on increased advisory and educational services;

achieve an Aggregated Cost Efficiency (ACE) index of +1 per cent.;

break even while achieving an average 6 per cent. real rate of return on capital,

over the period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 2003;

improve performance management across the business through delivery of the specified measures in the Business Plan 2000–01;

secure the long-term development of the organisation through (a) progression of the MOT Computerisation project; (b) continued development of electronic services delivery; and, (c) a network review resulting in an updated network strategy.

Commercial Property Leases

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the outcome of his Department's review of the property industry's Code of Practice on Commercial Property Leases; and if he will make a statement. [120069]

Mr. Raynsford: Research which I am publishing today shows that small business tenants still have little knowledge of property matters. I consider it essential that they should be properly informed, to enable them to get the best deals in the market rather than the standard packages still too often on offer.

I urge the industry and professions to join Government in ensuring that small businesses, and particularly those starting in business for the first time, have access to information about property arrangements. We will be making a contribution through the new Small Business Service, but I look to the industry and the professions to play their part.

We need to consider how Government, industry and the professions can be more proactive. It is not just a matter of providing information: we need to prompt those setting

up in business to ask the right questions at the outset, to help them make the right choices, thus ensuring that their form of property occupation assists rather than hinders their business development.

The research, on the impact of the Code of Practice on Commercial Property Leases since its introduction in 1995, was carried out by Reading University and was designed to see how far the Code of Practice had brought about more flexibility in the commercial property market.

The findings show that while the Code itself has had little impact, the market is now granting much shorter leases and has become more transparent.

I am concerned that upward-only rent reviews still predominate in longer leases, and while I welcome the report's evidence of greater flexibility, I am disappointed that the Code of Practice has not had a greater influence.

To see if we can avoid regulating lease terms, I invite the industry and property professions to consider:

the scope and contents of the Code of Practice;

the arrangements for disseminating the Code and other forms of advice for tenants;

how the market could promote alternatives to upward-only rent review clauses, ensuring that they are presented attractively while bearing the appropriate price tag; and

how to promote a better understanding of the workings of dispute mechanisms; in particular, to encourage wider take-up of the special disputes resolution scheme for small businesses which the RICS introduced last year.

I will be asking the industry and professions to consider these points, as they digest the Reading University report, and I will invite them to discuss them with me at a forthcoming meeting of my Department's Property Industry Forum.

Airports (Public Safety Zone Policy)

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the residual work of the Civil Aviation Authority in administering the Public Safety Zone policy will be transferred to his Department. [120070]

Mr. Mullin: Since 1 January 1982, the Civil Aviation Authority has, under a Memorandum of Understanding negotiated with the then Secretary of State for Trade, undertaken responsibility, on behalf of the Secretary of State, for advising local authorities on planning applications relating to sites within Public Safety Zones. The draft circular issued for consultation on 15 June 1999 contained guidance to local authorities to enable them to decide planning applications within Public Safety Zones without the need for advice from the Authority. In the light of the comments received on the draft circular, I am satisfied that I should meet the Authority's wish to discontinue its role in Public Safety Zone administration. The Authority will be terminating the Memorandum of Understanding with early effect. In the interim period before the new circular comes into effect, my Department will be willing to provide advice to local authorities in place of the Authority where this would be appropriate.

The announcement of 15 June 1999 also referred to the establishment of Public Safety Zones at other airports for which modelling work suggested that this would be justified. In the light of the modelling work so far completed, Public Safety Zones will be established for Biggin Hill, Exeter, Humberside, Inverness and Plymouth airports.

Newspapers (Recycled Content)

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made in his negotiations with newspaper publishers to develop a voluntary agreement for increases in the levels of recycled content in newspapers; and if he will make a statement. [120297]

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased to be able to announce today the successful conclusion of my negotiations with the newspaper publishers. Ten years ago, the publishers entered into a voluntary agreement with the Government to increase levels of recycled fibre in newspapers. Over the last decade this has led to increases in the recycled content of newspapers from 28 per cent. to 52.4 per cent.

Both I and the newspaper publishers acknowledge that to achieve further significant increases in recycled content will require a major addition to the recycled output from British newspaper mills. However, in anticipation that the new capacity will be forthcoming within the next two years UK publishers have agreed the following targets: 60 per cent. by the end of 2001; 65 per cent. by the end of 2003; 70 per cent. by the end of 2006.

The newspaper publishers have said that it is their firm intention to achieve these targets but the Government recognise that there may be factors beyond their control. Progress towards these targets will, therefore, be continually monitored by the Newspaper Recycling Working Group with formal in-depth reviews carried out at each target stage. At these reviews, the following factors will be taken into account:

the availability of additional reprocessing capacity, which is dependent on whether a decision to increase investment is reached this year;

the growth in consumption of newsprint, which is currently about 2.5 per cent. per annum;

the quality of the recycled newsprint available and, in particular, whether this hindered the production process significantly and damaged the product;

any uncompetitive pricing of recycled newsprint by newsprint suppliers.

The reviews will be on the basis of an understanding that the objective of the agreement is to achieve high and rising recycled content of UK newspapers; and the newspaper publishers have reaffirmed their commitment to continue to achieve the most stringent targets compatible with such newly-arising factors which may be beyond the control of industry.

Environmental Pollution

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the findings of the Financial Management and Policy Review of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. [120298]

Mr. Meacher: The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution advises Ministers on dangers to the environment, environmental issues and priorities, and ways of integrating environmental concerns and objectives with other, economic and social, objectives in order to

achieve sustainable development. As a non-departmental public body, the Commission is subject to a financial management and policy review every five years and my Department appointed in-house consultants last January to undertake this work. The Review, which comprised two stages, is now complete. Stage 1 found that there is a continuing need for the Royal Commission to advise Government on environmental policy and sustainable development and that the Commission provided the most efficient and cost-effective means of delivering this.

The second stage of the Review considered the performance of the Commission in greater depth, making recommendations on the Commission's relationship with Government; its strategic planning arrangements, including processes for reviewing performance and auditing impact; internal organisation and working methods, financial management, staffing and the role of the secretariat; and membership arrangements, including appointments. The overall conclusion of the Review is very positive and, though a number of recommendations are intended to enhance effectiveness, the Review commends the Commission for action which it has already taken to update and improve its working methods.

We accept all the findings of the Review and are developing an implementation strategy for future action taking up its Recommendations. The Review is available on my Department's website www.detr.gov.uk and copies are being placed in the Library of the House. A detailed Implementation Strategy is being prepared, which will also be available on the DETR website.

London Luton Airport

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he plans to consider the application by EasyJet Airline Ltd. for an order under section 40 of the Airports Act 1986 designating London Luton Airport as an airport at which a cap would be imposed on the maximum amount to be levied by the airport operators by way of airport charges. [120340]

Mr. Mullin: As provided for in section 16 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, I have asked the Civil Aviation Authority for assistance and advice in this matter. The Authority will take representations from EasyJet and London Luton Airport Operations Ltd., and seek views from other interested parties as it sees fit. I have asked the Authority to report to me, with a recommendation, by the end of July.

Plutonium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what policies are in place to cover the management of separated plutonium and plutonium contaminated wastes in the United Kingdom. [119133]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 13 April 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

The Government's policies on these materials are set out in United Kingdom Civil Nuclear Policy Including Plutonium, which was presented to the House in January 1998, and Review of Radioactive Waste Management Policy Final Conclusions, Cm 2919 of July 1995, respectively.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Communications Reform White Paper

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on consultation on the Communications Reform White Paper. [120179]

Mr. Chris Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I encourage anyone with ideas or thoughts on the substance of the White Paper to submit them to us, either in writing or via our e-mail address, consultation@communicationswhitepaper.gov.uk, by 23 June 2000.

Unless contributors make it clear that they do not want their contributions to be published, we intend to place most of the material submitted to us on our website. We hope that this will generate further comment and debate as we prepare the main messages of the White Paper.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119553]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department's policy on website advertising is in accordance with that set out in the Framework policy and guidelines for the use, management and design of public sector websites, which forms part of the e-government strategy.

My Department's policy on website sponsorship is the same as that which applies to any other form of Departmental publication.

No advertisements have appeared on the Departmental or agency websites in the period mentioned. Nor have any website sponsorship arrangements been entered into.

Information on the non-departmental public body sites could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iran

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the use made of the weekly Mojahed publication by *(a)* the terrorist group Mujaheddin Khalq Organisation of Iran and *(b)* the National Council of Resistance in Iran; if this publication is registered as a newspaper with the Post Office; and if he will make a statement on the contents of this publication. [119017]

Mr. Battle: This Government's position on both the Mujaheddin-e-Khalq Organisation (MKO) and the National Council for the Resistance of Iran (NCRI) is

clear. We do not recognise the NCRI, of which the MKO is the dominant group. The British Government remain firmly opposed to the violence practised by the MKO.

We understand that the Mojahed publication is registered as a newspaper with the Post Office. As long as people do not break our laws, they are free to express views with which we might profoundly disagree.

BBC World Service

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many countries receive BBC World Service broadcasts. [119590]

Mr. Hain: The BBC World Service broadcasts to all countries in the world. The latest weekly global audience figure of 151 million is based on surveys of listeners in 122 countries. There are very few places where the World Service cannot be received. But in a number of places it is difficult or impossible to measure audiences.

India

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has held with his ministerial colleagues in the European Union concerning the appointment of a commission by the Indian Government relating to religious freedom in India; and if he will make a statement. [119561]

Mr. Hain: Officials in our High Commission in New Delhi regularly discuss human rights issues, including freedom of religion, with their EU counterparts. I also discussed rights of minorities, including religious minorities, with my Indian interlocutors during my visit there in November. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Gibraltar

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in the current discussions about issues concerning Gibraltar in the European Union. [119997]

Mr. Robin Cook: I am pleased to announce that, following extensive consultation with the Government of Gibraltar and with their support, and with the encouragement of our EU partners, the United Kingdom has successfully concluded discussions with Spain to overcome difficulties which have arisen on a number of issues within the European Union concerning Gibraltar. As a result:

arrangements have been established whereby formal communications and notification of decisions between Gibraltar authorities and their counterparts in other member states under EU legislation will be conveyed through a Unit established in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. The arrangements will enable Gibraltar to derive immediate benefits in the development of its banking and insurance industries. They will unblock important measures for the development of the single market and in the Justice and Home Affairs field to the benefit of the UK and Gibraltar and prevent similar blockages in the future. The arrangements uphold the constitutional position of Gibraltar, while at the same time removing a major obstacle to the development of EU business. The arrangements are being notified to the Secretary General of the Council in Brussels together with an exchange of correspondence between the UK and Spanish Permanent Representatives to the EU. A copy of the exchange of correspondence and the arrangements will be placed in the Library of the House.

the identity card issued in Gibraltar will be recognised as a valid travel document throughout the EU, following some reformatting which is proposed by the Government of Gibraltar to associate the identity card with the UK as the member state responsible for Gibraltar. The UK Permanent Representative to the EU is writing to the Permanent Representatives of all other EU member states to inform them of the proposed reformatting. A copy of this letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

arrangements will be established under the Schengen Convention to enhance co-operation between the Royal Gibraltar Police and the Spanish police forces in the fight against transfrontier and other crimes in the region, as part of the Europe-wide fight against crime called for at the Tampere Special European Council last October and in keeping with Gibraltar's longstanding commitment in this respect. These arrangements have been initialled. The intention is that they will be signed by the Home Secretary and his Spanish counterpart, as required by the Schengen Convention, when the Council Decision on the UK Schengen application is adopted. A copy of the initialled text will be placed in the Library of the House.

a revised version of the draft Council Decision on the UK's Schengen application, including the relevant addition covering Gibraltar which has hitherto been left open, will be circulated by the Presidency shortly. It will provide for Gibraltar's participation in all the provisions in which the UK participates (except the Schengen Information System and cross border surveillance). It will be submitted to the scrutiny committee.

The Government welcome the outcome of these discussions. It represents a very good outcome for the UK, for Gibraltar and for all our EU partners. We hope that it will also help to improve the climate of dialogue and the spirit of co-operation with regard to Gibraltar between Spain, and the UK and Gibraltar.

Chechnya

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of *(a)* the appointment of the Presidential Special Representative for Human Rights in Chechnya and *(b)* whether Council of Europe representatives working with him will have operational freedom to investigate human rights abuses without hindrance from the Russian authorities. [119453]

Mr. Vaz: We accept that the appointment of Mr. Kalamanov is intended to demonstrate Russia's commitment to its human rights undertakings in Chechnya. We have supported the efforts of the Council of Europe's Secretary General to establish conditions for the attachment of CoE Representatives to Mr. Kalamanov's office which ensure that they will be able to examine and report cases of human rights violations which are brought to their attention.

South-Eastern Europe (Stability Pact)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions donor countries have had with the countries of South Eastern Europe with respect to their role as parties to the Stability Pact. [119455]

Mr. Vaz: Donor countries have had numerous discussions with countries of South Eastern Europe about the Stability Pact, both multilaterally and bilaterally. The most recent multilateral meeting was the Regional Funding Conference which I attended in Brussels on 29–30 March.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions are taking place between Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia and Stability Pact donors about finance for Corridor 8. [119457]

Mr. Vaz: Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia discussed the question of Corridor eight most recently at a meeting of their Foreign Ministers on 24 March. We know from the summary of basic infrastructure investments prepared by the European Investment Bank for the Regional Funding Conference for South-Eastern Europe that Albania has also had discussions with the European Investment Bank and Italy about its proposals for Corridor eight. Decisions on allocating funds to particular projects in the framework of the Stability Pact are expected soon.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what resources have been committed by each significant donor to the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe; which resources have already been disbursed; and for what purpose. [119454]

Mr. Vaz: The Office of the Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact has not yet produced details of donor commitments. The total commitment made at the recent Regional Funding Conference for South-Eastern Europe was over 2.4 billion euros. The Office of the Special Co-ordinator is arranging a meeting to discuss commitments to individual projects.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress is being made on bilateral and multilateral initiatives with respect to *(a)* economic development, *(b)* trade and *(c)* organised crime and corruption in South Eastern Europe. [119456]

Mr. Vaz: Numerous initiatives concerning these issues have been submitted by individual countries and international financial institutions. A large number have been proposed under the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and were tabled at the Regional Funding Conference in Brussels 29–30 March (details are on www.stabilitypact.org). The Office of the Special Co-ordinator is arranging a meeting to discuss commitments to individual projects.

Russia

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent exchanges he has had with the Russian Foreign Minister on human rights. [119504]

Mr. Vaz: During my right hon. Friend's visit to Moscow in February human rights were high on the agenda for talks with Acting President Putin and Foreign Minister Ivanov, with the focus very much on Chechnya. The Prime Minister also discussed Chechnya at length with Acting President Putin in St. Petersburg on 11 March and most recently on 17 April.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Harmon *v.* HOC Corporate Officer

Mrs. Roe: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what steps the House of Commons has taken following the judgment of the High Court in the case of Harmon *v.* Corporate Officer of the House of Commons. [119804]

Mr. Kirkwood: On 28 October 1999, His Honour Judge Lloyd QC gave judgment on liability in this action, which was brought by an unsuccessful tenderer for the fenestration contract for Portcullis House. The judge held that the Corporate Officer, on behalf of the House, was liable to Harmon for breach of the Public Works Contracts Regulations 1991, of European law and implied contract. The action is now continuing for the purpose of assessing the amount of the damages.

Concerned by the judgment, the House of Commons Commission asked the Clerk of the House to arrange an independent inquiry. On 17 January 2000, the Clerk accordingly appointed Sir Thomas Legg KCB QC, a former Permanent Secretary of the Lord Chancellor's Department, and Mr. Peter Bosworth, a consultant specialising in project management, to consider the judgment in the case, to inquire into the circumstances which led to it, and to advise him, and through him the Commission, on any action to be taken, including any changes in the structure and practices of the Parliamentary Works Directorate.

Sir Thomas and Mr. Bosworth completed their inquiry, and submitted their report, on 21 March 2000. The action is still *sub judice* but I can tell hon. Members that the inquiry concluded in the first place that serious mistakes were made in the handling of the fenestration contract, which exposed the House to liability; and secondly that in future major projects the Parliamentary Works Directorate should establish more clearly: (a) the roles and responsibilities of key members of the project team; (b) a project management process to include guidelines and control systems; and (c) lines of governance within a culture of professional and technical support; and that these recommendations should be taken into account in the current review of the Parliamentary Works Directorate.

The Commission considered the report of the inquiry on 10 April and accepted its conclusions.

Ministerial Responsibilities

Sir George Young: To ask the President of the Council, pursuant to her oral answer of 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 1152, if she has initiated a review of procedures for making documents available to hon. Members; in what terms she has written to her ministerial colleagues on their responsibilities to the House; and if she will publish their responses and her conclusions at the end of this review. [118657]

Mrs. Beckett: I have written, in my capacity as Leader of the House, to ministerial colleagues reminding them of the importance of making documents available to hon. Members in the House.

I also refer the right hon. Member to Madam Speaker's comments on 18 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 829–30.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Works of Art

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been spent on *(a)* the upkeep and *(b)* the purchase of works of art in his Department for each financial year since 1992. [117477]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth) on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 392–93W.

Police Time

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the percentage of police officer time in Leicestershire spent on paperwork in the last year for which figures are available. [113169]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the proportion of time spent by police officers on different tasks is not held centrally. The Association of Chief Police Officers is currently recommending a paper-based method of activity sampling which can be subjected to automated analysis, and is examining Information Technology solutions for the future. These will be compatible with systems being developed under the Home Office's National Strategy for Police Information Systems (NSPIS).

The Government are determined to do everything in their power to help increase the effectiveness of the police in fighting crime, and to ensure that officers are able to spend as much of their time as possible on the front line, as the following measures demonstrate:

The NSPIS Custody and Case Preparation systems, in which we recently announced a new £40 million investment, will minimise the effort involved in completing forms from arrest to prosecution. There are about 1.3 million paper case-files a year which travel between the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts. In the course of preparing cases, police officers complete many different forms, repeating information which had already been made available for other legal requirements. The Custody and Case Preparation systems will automatically share information for delivery to the relevant bodies. This not only saves the police time completing forms, but also avoids making mistakes which take further time to resolve.

The National Automated Fingerprint Identification System (NAFIS) will make possible the electronic capture and identification of fingerprints directly from those who come into custody. This eliminates the need for paper copies and clerical activity and speeds up access to any relevant history.

The introduction of the Public Service Radio Communications System (PSRCS), which will provide data as well as voice communications, will give the police direct information links to police computer systems while they are on patrol, reducing the need to return to the station to complete forms or to obtain important operational information and increasing their operational availability.

Measures introduced last November following the recommendations of the Narey report on Delays in the Criminal Justice systems have gone some way towards reducing the administrative burdens on police officers, and it may be that action which is now being taken pursuant to the Glidewell report on the Crown Prosecution Service will also help in this respect. But work on prosecution case files forms only a part, albeit an important one, of the paperwork required of the police.

The Cabinet Office 'Public Sector Efficiency Team', set up to investigate and provide ways of reducing the burden of bureaucracy in the public sector, have recently published "Making a Difference: Reducing Police Paperwork". The report examines the impact of paperwork on front-line officers, identifying forms that are a burden to the police. It sets out practical solutions that will lead to a significant reduction in the amount of time police have to spend on paperwork by simplifying or removing reports from the system.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what methodologies have been developed to estimate the time spent by police officers on *(a)* paperwork, *(b)* detection and *(c)* prevention of crime; and if he will make a statement. [114365]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Information on the proportion of time spent by police officers on different tasks is not held centrally. The Association of Chief Police Officers is currently recommending a paper-based method of activity sampling which can be subjected to automated analysis, and is examining Information Technology solutions for the future. These will be compatible with systems being developed under the Home Office's National Strategy for Police Information Systems (NSPIS).

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Electoral Commission

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what previous political activity will make a person unsuitable to be appointed as an electoral commissioner. [119147]

Mr. Straw: The recruitment process to find the Commissioners will begin shortly and applicants will be asked to declare any political activity within the last ten years. It will be for the selection panel to determine whether that activity has been such as to make the applicant unsuitable for consideration for appointment. For the Commission to perform effectively the functions given to it by Parliament, it must command wide confidence that it is entirely independent and non-partisan. Accordingly, Commissioners must not be, or be perceived to be, associated with any political party.

We also think that it is right that there should be statutory disqualifiers. My noble Friend, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department said on Second Reading of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill in another place that the Government intend to bring forward amendments to disqualify from appointment as Commissioners persons who have had substantial involvement in party politics.

The Government will be seeking to disqualify any person who within the last ten years has

held a relevant effective office as defined in paragraph 1(8) of Schedule 6 to the Bill;

been an officer of registered political party or one of its accounting units; and

appeared in the register of recordable Donations maintained by the Commission.

Additionally, we will be proposing that no person shall be able to serve as a Commissioner while a member of a political party. We shall also be seeking powers to allow for the automatic termination of appointment if a Commissioner:

stands for a relevant elective office;

takes up any office or employment with a registered political party (including accounting units), recognised third parties or permitted participants; and

makes a recordable donation.

These additional measures will strengthen the independence of the Commission. The recruitment material sent to applicants will make clear the Government's intention to make these changes to the Bill.

Kosovan Refugees

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of Kosovan refugees living in Greater London. [118830]

Mrs. Roche: Information on the number of Kosovan refugees living in Greater London is not available.

Information on the location of refugees is not available, since once an asylum seeker becomes a refugee they no longer are an immigration case, so the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) do not hold any further information on the person/family.

Kosovan asylum seekers are not separately identified within IND statistics. Kosovo is a region in Yugoslavia and applications from Kosovans are included within the nationality Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which also includes Serbia and Montenegro. Information on asylum seekers is recorded on a national rather than regional basis and information on the location of asylum seekers is not held centrally.

Young Offenders

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many recorded incidents of *(a)* suicide, *(b)* attempted suicide and *(c)* self-injury at youth offenders' institutions in England there were in each year since 1991. [119139]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the tables.

Self-inflicted deaths at young offender institutions 1991–2000

	Number
1991	4
1992	4
1993	1
1994	1
1995	2
1996	6
1997	5
1998	5
1999	8
2000[1]	1
Total	37

[1] As at 14 April 2000

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Incidents of self-harm at young offender institutions 1990–91 to 1999–2000

	Number
1990–91	312
1991–92	341
1992–93	469
1993–94	474
1994–95	717
1995–96	1,143
1996–97	793
1997–98	879
1998–99	944
1999–2000[1]	n/a

[1] Not yet available

Notes:

1. Establishments have been categorised according to their primary role. However, it should be noted that there are a number of other prisons that hold young offenders (eg male remand centres) which are not included.
2. Not all self-inflicted deaths conclude with a verdict of suicide.
3. Incidents do not equate to numbers of prisoners as an individual prisoner may self-harm more than once.
4. Self-harm data are derived from information provided by establishments to the Prison Health Policy Unit. These data include information on all attempted suicides.

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many recorded incidents of *(a)* suicide, *(b)* attempted suicide and *(c)* self-injury there were at Brinsford Young Offenders' Institution in each year since the prison was opened. [119023]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the tables.

Self-inflicted deaths at HMYOI and RC Brinsford 1991–2000[1]

	Number
1991	0
1992	1
1993	0
1994	1
1995	0
1996	1
1997	0
1998	0
1999	2
2000[1]	2
Total	7

Incidents of self-harm at HMYOI and RC Brinsford 1990–91 to 1999–2000

	Number
1990–91	0
1991–92	30
1992–93	77
1993–94	61
1994–95	237
1995–96	301
1996–97	157
1997–98	90
1998–99	105
1999–00[2]	n/a

[1] As at 14 April 2000

[2] Not yet available

Notes:

1. HMYOI and RC Brinsford opened in November 1991.
2. Establishments have been categorised according to their primary role. However, it should be noted that there are a number of other prisons that hold young offenders (e.g. male remand centres) which are not included.
3. Not all self-inflicted deaths conclude with a verdict of suicide.
4. Incidents do not equate to numbers of prisoners as an individual prisoner may self-harm more than once.
5. Self-harm data are derived from information provided by establishments to the Prison Service Health Policy Unit. These data also include all attempted suicides.

Mary Walls

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will request an inquest into the death of Mary Walls; and if he will make a statement. [117956]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry) on 18 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 423W.

Police Central Switchboard Calls

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the annual cost to the public of making telephone calls to a police central switchboard at national rates; and if he will assess the benefits of subsidising the service in order to encourage more people to report crime. [119232]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office has made no such estimate.

Gurpal Virdi

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in relation to the Metropolitan Police disciplinary hearing for Sergeant Gurpal Virdi in February, what was the outcome of the request for a tape recorder; what assurance was given of the availability of the transcript; how many days have passed since the end of the hearing without a transcript being made available to Sergeant Virdi; when the police solicitors received a copy; and if he will authorise the release of the transcript. [119477]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that Counsel for Sergeant Virdi withdrew his request for the proceedings to be separately tape-recorded. As a result, no tape recorder was provided for the defendant. A private company employed by the Metropolitan police undertook the official transcription and indicated that they would be able to provide a full transcript within 17 working days from the conclusion of the hearing. Thirty working days have passed since the conclusion of the hearing on 3 March 2000. The Metropolitan Police Complaints Investigation Branch took delivery of the transcripts on 12 April. These are now being collated with all the other relevant papers and will be sent simultaneously to Sergeant Virdi and Metropolitan police solicitors as soon as they are ready. The release of the transcripts is a matter for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations the Metropolitan police made about the date of the tribunal on the unfair dismissal claim by Sergeant Gurpal Virdi; and when they first asked for a postponement. [119478]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the position in relation to Sergeant Gurpal Virdi's case before the employment tribunal remains unaltered since my reply to the hon. Gentleman on 30 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 110W, and that no further postponement has been sought by the Metropolitan police.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119510]

Mr. Straw: Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill provides the law enforcement, security and intelligence agencies with the power to require communications data, such as subscriber details and itemised billing, in a closely controlled manner and for a number of specific purposes such as preventing or detecting crime.

The Bill provides greater safeguards than those which are currently in place for the provision of such data under the Data Protection Act regime, but the purposes for which it may be obtained under the new legislation are very similar. As a result, I do not expect any significant change in the extent to which communications data are obtained.

Immigration

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to make a decision on the case of Home Office visa application number S1016548 in the name of Phailin Sae Kuay; and if he will make a statement. [119657]

Mrs. Roche: A decision has now been made in this case and a reply to the hon. Member was sent on 17 April from the Integrated Casework Directorate.

Disabled Parking Places

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to set a national level of fines on people parking illegally in areas reserved for disabled drivers. [119303]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* There is a maximum national level of fines for the offence of parking illegally in an area reserved for disabled drivers. The maximum penalty is a level 3 fine, currently £1,000. When such offences are brought before the courts it is for the court to decide the nature and severity of penalties, taking account of the circumstances of the offence and the offender.

More commonly, such offences are dealt with under the fixed penalty system in which the offender is required to pay a fixed penalty notice in lieu of prosecution. This is currently £20 for all such non-endorsable offences outside London, £30 inside London and £40 on Red Routes. The different levels of penalty reflect greater traffic pressures and congestion in London and the need for greater compliance. The level of fixed penalty are under review.

Distraction Burglary

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to respond to the crime of distraction burglary. [120181]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Bogus callers claim over 16,000 victims every year, but the true figure is believed to be much higher because many people do not report the burglary.

This is a particularly nasty crime as its victims are usually the most vulnerable people in our society; more often than not they are older people living alone.

I have established a steering group bringing together government and industry. Its membership is made up of: Severn Trent Water, Water UK, the Electricity Association, the Association of Chief Police Officers, Age Concern, BT Security, Crime Concern, Crimestoppers, the National Neighbourhood Watch Association, the Institute of Trading Standards, the National Housing Federation and the Womens Royal Volunteer Service. It first met on 11 April and is currently finalising a detailed set of proposals to take forward its work.

This group will:

pull together existing good practice from across the country;

establish a database so that details on offenders can be shared;

provide co-ordinated advice for victims of this crime; and

produce a help pack for workers who have regular contact with people from vulnerable groups.

Two staff will support it: a community Safety Officer from local government and a police detective superintendent. Both are based at the Home Office.

I will tomorrow, with the National Neighbourhood Watch Association and Severn Trent Water, launch this initiative with the first nationwide leaflet drop to groups and residents across the country.

I am pleased to report that Water UK have agreed to provide sponsorship support for this initiative for two years. The Electricity Association has also agreed to support the Taskforce by a financial contribution.

This is not, however, a crime that the Government can tackle alone. Organisations that send out people for home visits have an enormous role to play and I am very pleased that so many have agreed to support this initiative. But more is needed and we will continue to seek support from all our partners in this.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from

such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119549]

Mr. Straw: My Department's policy follows the guidance given in the Framework policy and guidelines for the use, management and design of public sector websites. This document, which forms part of the e-government strategy, can be found on the website of the Information Age Government Champions. The official websites of my Department and its executive agencies do not currently carry any advertising or company sponsorship and have never done so in the past. The non-departmental public bodies have set up their own websites independently of the Home Office in most cases. The information requested for these bodies is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Coronation Service

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place a copy of Professor Paul Weller's report containing recommendations on the Coronation Service in the Library. [119721]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A copy of Professor Paul Weller's interim report on his research project on religious discrimination was placed in the Library on 27 January. The report mentions the Coronation Service in passing, but makes no recommendations about it.

Police Recruits

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 13 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 258W, if his estimates of the cost of a police recruit, published in the Crime Fighting Fund bidding guidelines still apply; what the cost is of providing *(a)* the 2,000 additional recruits in 2000–01 and *(b)* the 3,000 additional recruits in 2001–02; if he has announced funding for the provision of the 2,000 additional recruits in 2000–01 above the £11 million he announced on 6 April 2000 and the £35 million he announced on 30 September 1999; what discussions he has had with police forces on the revised allocation of those recruits and of funding for them; if he will publish the revised allocation; and if he will make a statement. [119780]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to the reply I gave her on 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 595–96W.

The estimates of the cost of a police recruit as set out in the Crime Fighting Fund bidding guidelines, a copy of which was placed in the Library on 2 December 1999, still apply. My officials have held discussions with police service and police authority representatives and I will make a further announcement as soon as the details of the accelerated scheme have been finalised.

HEALTH

Residential Homes (Elderly)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department has carried out research into the impact on life expectancy for residents of the closure of residential homes for the elderly; and if he will make a statement. [119470]

Mr. Hutton: There has been no research carried out into the impact on life expectancy for residents of the closure of residential homes for the elderly.

We are considering the need for such research and expect to make an announcement in the near future.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on how many occasions, during official visits outside London, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), has met *(a)* trade union representatives and *(b)* Community Health Council representatives. [119471]

Ms Stuart: I have met representatives of trades unions, staff and Community Health Councils informally during official visits outside London. I also met with members of the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union on 4 November 1999 and the Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales on 22 February 2000 in London.

Both organisations have a role to play in modernising the National Health Service and I will continue to meet with their representatives as appropriate.

Voice Output Communication Aids

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received from LEAs requesting central Government ring-fenced financing for voice output communication aids in special schools for pupils with communication difficulties; and if he will make a statement; [119221]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to help special schools and LEAs to improve the provision of communication aids for children with speech and communication problems; [119222]

(3) if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the provision of voice output communication aids in special schools, for children with learning disabilities and lack of verbal communication skills; [119223]

(4) what responsibility his Department has for the provision of voice output communication aids for pupils attending special schools who have health-related disabilities; and if he will make a statement. [119224]

Mr. Hutton: We have received no direct representations from local education authorities about communication aids for children in special schools.

Between 1992 and 1995, the Department, in collaboration with the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), funded an initiative on communication aids for children which published Guidelines to Good Practice in 1995. This promotes the importance of a jointly planned, funded and delivered service. It advocates a multi-professional local service to meet local needs.

This guidance continues to reflect Departmental policy. We do however recognise that further development is needed to ensure local services are able to take advantage of the wide range of sophisticated electronic devices which are now available.

We are currently considering with DfEE what action may be necessary to further improve these services.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119440]

Ms Stuart: So that the Cabinet Office can publish the spring 2000 report monitoring progress towards the delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005, we are currently collecting data, which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. I do not want to pre-empt that report but I can say that we currently provide a range of services electronically. Those included are:

NHS Direct on-line—(http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

which supports the NHS Direct 24-hour nurse staffed telephone help line for people who want information and advice about health, illness and services. This service was launched in December 1999.

Information and knowledge for patients and healthcare professionals will be delivered through the development of the National electronic Library for Health—(http://www.nelh.nhs.uk)—a virtual library designed to provide easy access to best current knowledge about health and healthcare, in order to improve clinical practice and patient choice. It is intended to give access to both healthcare professionals and patients. It is already being piloted and should be rolled out across the NHS by 2002.

Department of Health—(http://www.doh.gov.uk)

The Department's website provides a wide range of guidance and services on line. Key examples include:

Guidance and information on policies, initiatives and services

Departmental circulars and publications are available online on the Department's COIN (Circulars On the INternet) and POINT (Publications On the INTernet) databases

Chief Medical Officer's Urgent Alerts cascaded electronically to health authorities

A dedicated corporate e-mail address for inquiries from members of the public

Consultative exercises on particular policies or initiatives eg children's services planning and deafblind services

Statistical returns from the NHS and local authorities

Information alerting business to opportunities eg

Private finance initiative standard contract form and guidance

A management consultancy database which enables management consultants to register their organisation's details and experience which are then accessible through the departmental intranet to the Department's staff.

Tendering opportunities—most recently human resource management development programmes for the NHS, a briefing Pack and expression of interest questionnaire were published on the website.

Contributions to the pan-governmental sites—direct access government and the local government web ring

A number of forms can be downloaded from the site (eg Section 64 Grants)

Research and development funding—guidance and application forms for national and regional research and development programmes

Links to relevant sites

Medicines Control Agency—(http://www.mca.gov.uk)

Website

Application forms and some guidance notes can be downloaded from the MCA's website, as can order forms for publications and the catalogue for the MCA's Eurodirect publications service.

E-mail

All staff in the MCA have e-mail addresses and can be contacted electronically. There is also a dedicated corporate e-mail address for inquiries from members of the public.

AEGIS (ADROIT Electronically Generated Information Service)

AEGIS allows the electronic transmission of Adverse Drug Reaction (ADR) data between the MCA and selected pharmaceutical companies. AEGIS is a continuously evolving system involving close liaison between the MCA and participating pharmaceutical companies. AEGIS allows the supply of ADR data reports electronically, from the MCA's ADROIT system on demand, thus allowing access to up-to-date information and easy transfer of data to subscribing companies. The AEGIS system also allows messages to be sent to and from the MCA using the Mail facility. This allows the MCA to deal with individual company's specific queries. AEGIS enables ADR reports to be sent to the MCA electronically using the AEGIS e-mail system. The receipt of reports is also acknowledged electronically.

GP electronic reporting of ADRs

The MCA has worked closely with two general practitioner prescribing system suppliers (EMIS and AAH MEDITEL) to develop an electronic "Yellow Card" (the means by which ADRs are reported to the MCA by healthcare professionals). The report is accessed from within the GPs computer system and allows most of the relevant information about the patient and their treatment to be automatically populated from the patients records hence minimising time consuming GP input.

RAMA (Remote Access to Marketing Authorisations)

The RAMA service provides subscribers with on line, real time access to non-confidential information on all authorised medicinal products in the UK and additional confidential information on their own medicinal products and can track the progress of their applications. Subscribers additionally can create some parts of their applications on RAMA and send them electronically to the MCA for final quality assurance and assessment.

NHS Pensions Agency (England and Wales) Website—(http://www.nhspa.gov.uk)

Scheme and NHS Pensions Agency latest developments

Contact details for the Agency's pension services including phone numbers, e-mail addresses

A comprehensive library containing

Scheme information booklets and instructional guides

Scheme regulations

Employer newsletter

Employer manuals of guidance

Reports and feedback from employer/agency consultative forums

The NHS Pensions Agency's annual report and accounts

The agency's Member's Charter

Complaints and dispute procedures

Frequently asked questions

Calendar of events

Interactive discussion forum

Links to relevant sites

Download page for appropriate software

Search facility and site map

NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency—(http://www.nhspa.gov.uk)

The NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency provides the following services on-line for NHS trusts and health authorities:

Electronic communications

The NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency website includes purchasing advice and information to NHS Trusts, provides information, promotional and technical information in support of contracting activity and a web version of the Agency's contracts catalogue.

Electronic catalogues

NHS Supplies' contracts catalogue, with 4,217 contracts and 1,428 suppliers, produced on CD ROM, continued to be developed throughout 1999 in response to NHS trusts' suggestions for improvement. A web version of the contracts catalogue has been available since September 1999. 3,000 CDs are issued monthly with 140,000 products shown.

Links to contracted suppliers

Electronic links have been created between the Agency's website and a dedicated NHS-contract website developed by suppliers in a joint initiative with NHS Supplies. This link enables NHS Trusts to access a wide variety of additional product and technical information to aid their purchase decisions.

Supplier profiles and information

The development of links to supplier websites for contracted products incorporates a parallel development on the display of company profile information, to provide trusts with standard company information required as part of the tendering process. This information is now available to all trusts from a number of the Agency's contracted suppliers and eliminates the need for suppliers to provide such data in paper format. With over 1,400 suppliers more work is required during the year to obtain critical mass.

European Union contract notices

NHS Supplies has played an active part in the development of an information technology software package to allow the electronic transmission of contract notices to the European Union in Brussels. The heads of purchasing in the Department of Health and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions also supported this work.

Contract management system

During 1999, a contract work plan management system was developed in-house by NHS Supplies to enable buyers to record and monitor purchasing and contracting work in progress. Relevant information from this system will be displayed on the Agency's website to give trusts information on the Agency's detailed purchasing and contracting plans for 2000–01.

NHS Estates—(http://www.nhsestates.gov.uk)

On the NHS Estates website, there is general information on NHS Estates, including download publications and policy information.

Medical Devices Agency—(http://www.medical-devices.gov.uk)

Services currently provided on line include:

e-mail links into the agency

Regulatory guidance

Publications catalogue

Corporate information, roles and responsibilities

MDA business plan, annual report and accounts

Contact information (including a complaints procedure)

Full text of hazard and safety notices and device alerts

Advice on reporting adverse incidents

Literature reviews

Information on global harmonisation

Links to related sites

Year 2000 information on medical devices

Notification of job opportunities.

Infection Control

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the amount spent on infection control in the NHS for each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement; [118853]

(2) how many NHS trusts have infection control teams in place; and what is the average amount spent by trusts on infection control in each of the past five years. [118852]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* All acute National Health Service trusts have an infection control team. Details of the amount spent by the NHS, including trusts, on infection control, are not held centrally. Expenditure on infection control is a matter for individual organisations to determine in the light of their local circumstances. Infection control is a priority for the NHS and is a "must do" in the "Modernising Health and Social Services National Priorities Guidance 2000/01—2002/03".

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to revise his Department's 1995 guidance on infection control following the report by the National Audit Office on the Management and Control of Hospital-Acquired Infection in Acute Trusts in England; and if he will make a statement. [118855]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* Action has already been taken to update and reinforce the 1995 guidance. Infection Control standards for National Health Service acute trusts were issued in November 1999 and a circular was issued on 11 February setting out a timetabled programme of action to strengthen arrangements for the prevention and control of infection in hospitals.

Guillain Barré Syndrome

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of current standards of care for patients in the acute stage of Guillain-Barré syndrome. [119775]

Ms Stuart: We are not aware of any assessments made into the current standards of care for patients in the acute stage of Guillain-Barré Syndrome.

There are a number of National Health Service services which patients with Guillain-Barré Syndrome may access. These services can include care and advice from their general practitioner, support from therapists and nursing support.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of patients suffering from Guillain-Barré Syndrome received *(a)* intravenous immunoglobin and *(b)* plasma exchange in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii)1999 and (iv) 2000. [119776]

Ms Stuart: The tables show the number of finished consultant episodes (FCEs) where the main diagnosis was Guillain-Barré Syndrome, for selected procedures, in National Health Service hospitals in England, for the years 1996–97 to 1998–99. Data for 1999–2000 are not yet available.

Table 1: Finished consultant episodes (FCEs) where primary diagnosis was G61.0 (Guillain-Barré Syndrome) with any mention of the selection procedures
NHS Hospitals England 1996–97 to 1998–99

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Diagnosis G61.0	1,316	1,222	1,318
With procedure			
X30.1—Injection of rh immune globulin	28	14	11
X30.2—Injection of gamma globulin	83	68	88
X34.2—Transfusion of plasma	16	2	7
X35.2—Intravenous immunotherapy	63	59	61

Table 2: FCEs where primary diagnosis was G61.0 (Guillain-Barré Syndrome) with any mention of the selected procedures
NHS Hospitals England 1996–97 to 1998–99

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Diagnosis G61.0	1,316	1,222	1,318
Percentage with			
X30.1—Injection of rh immune globulin	2	1	1
X30.2—Injection of gamma globulin	6	6	7
X34.2—Transfusion of plasma	1	0	1
X35.2—Intravenous immunotherapy	5	5	5

Source:
Hospital Episodes Statistics (HES), Department of Health

An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes in one year.

There are four operation fields in the HES record—the above table shows a count of every mention of the procedures X30.1, X30.2, X34.2 or X35.3 in the episodes where G61.0 was the main diagnosis.

Data in the tables are grossed for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data, except for 1997–98 and 1998–99 which are ungrossed.

Dental Services

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have been deregistered for financial reasons by their dentist, in each health authority area, in each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [119163]

Mr. Hutton: Over the period 3 July 1992 to 29 March 1996, a weekly survey was carried out to see how many patients were being de-registered because their dentist was dissatisfied with the remuneration system. The results have been placed in the Library. The survey was ended after 1996 when registration stabilised. At the end of February 2000, 23.5 million people were registered with a GDS dentist, virtually the same as in February 1999, 23.6 million.

NHS Ancillary Staff

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 354W, on cleaning staff, if he will give details of *(a)* the total number of support staff in the NHS and *(b)* the total cost to the NHS of contract hotel services and laundry and cleaning equipment in the last financial year; and if he will make a statement. [119164]

Ms Stuart: National Health Service expenditure for contract hotel services, laundry and cleaning equipment in England 1998–99 is shown in the table.

Expenditure on in-house cleaning services is not collected centrally.

Analysis of NHS expenditure on contract hotel services and laundry and cleaning equipment—England, 1998–99

	Expenditure (£)
Contract hotel services (including cleaning)	247,634,567
Laundry and cleaning equipment	66,329,277
Total	313,963,844

Source:
Annual financial returns for health authorities and NHS trusts

The total number of support staff (NHS Hospital and Community Health Services) employed by the NHS in England as at 30 September 1998 is shown in the table.

	All support staff
Whole time equivalent	65,300
Numbers (headcount)	91,160

Source:
Department of Health non-medical workforce census

Mobile Phones

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the National Radiological Protection Board has finalised its report on the possible health effects of the use of mobile phones, stations and transmitters; and when the report will be published. [119462]

Yvette Cooper: The National Radiological Protection Board was asked to set up an independent expert group on mobile phones. The group, chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, has been considering the possible health effects from the use of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters and conducting a comprehensive assessment of existing research. The group is currently finalising its report and publication is expected in May.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the development of his Department's research plans on the biological and health effects of mobile phone masts; when these plans will be announced; and how they will be funded. [119461]

Yvette Cooper: Following our response to the report of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee on the scientific advisory system and mobile phones and health, discussions were held with the industry about funding a collaborative United Kingdom based research programme. Detailed research plans are currently being developed and will take into account the recommendations of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones expected to be published in May.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial

year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119548]

Ms Stuart: The Department complies with the "Framework Policy and Guidelines for Government Websites" published by the Central Information Technology Unit of the Cabinet Office. This allows for advertising and sponsorship on departmental web pages but advises that in many contexts this may not be appropriate.

The Department, its agencies and non-departmental bodies do not carry advertising or sponsorship on their websites. Some hyperlinks to free internet products do appear when it is judged that these may enhance viewing of the sites, for example to the free Adobe Acrobat viewer, but no revenue is received by the Department or its agencies and non-departmental bodies in return for these hyperlinks.

Some National Health Service websites mention companies who have provided services to assist in the development of the site. Examples include the site set up to mark the 50th anniversary of the NHS and NHS Direct Online. In these instances, the "sponsorship" is in the form of provision of technical services, and relationships such as these enable the NHS to get the best possible value for its web developments. In these cases, the NHS receives the technical service free of charge and does not obtain revenue for mention of company names or display of company logos.

Bread (Folic Acid)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to make the addition of folic acid to bread and bread flour a statutory requirement; and if he will make a statement. [119773]

Ms Stuart: We plan to consult widely on the addition of folic acid to flour, including bread and bread flour. The consultation is planned for later this year and a decision will be made after this process is completed.

Cleft Lip and Palate Services

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to ensure that their existing progressive treatment pattern is maintained for cleft lip and palate patients whose units are scheduled for closure following his Department's review. [119750]

Ms Stuart: Clinical decisions are based on the one-to-one relationship between clinicians and other health professionals and their patients. It will be for the main cleft lip and palate centres and their "spoke" units to ensure high standards of care through ongoing training and education and through quality control procedures such as national inter-centre audit.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason his Department has stipulated an average of 40 to 50 new referrals per surgeon per annum for designated cleft lip and palate units. [119748]

Ms Stuart: The report on cleft lip and palate services by the Clinical Standards Advisory Group proposed that all surgeons involved in the care of patients with cleft lip and palate malformations should perform at least 40 to 50 operations annually. We have accepted the recommendations of this report.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if current cleft lip and palate patients whose existing unit is closing will be able to choose the new unit to which they are referred for treatment. [119751]

Ms Stuart: It is proposed that cleft lip and palate services should be provided as a "hub and spoke" model. The main "hub" centres will provide specialist facilities for patients, and will work closely with a network of "spoke" hospitals that will provide continuing care services, thus improving access and availability.

Most patients will attend their nearest "spoke" centre for the routine elements of their care. The main "hub" centre will be responsible for specialist treatments, including both primary and secondary surgical episodes. Existing patients who require specialist care will normally attend the main "hub" centre linked to their "spoke" hospital. However, if there are good reasons, patients may be referred to another main "hub" centre for specialist treatments.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will name the cleft lip and palate units listed in Table 25 (Assessment of providers) of the Clinical Standards Advisory Group report published in February 1998. [119749]

Ms Stuart: This information was given on a confidential basis to the Clinical Standards Advisory Group research team, and was not made available. Since the research was carried out, the situation has changed and the information obtained is no longer correct.

Overseas Doctors

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines he issues on checking the previous employment records of overseas doctors wishing to register to practise in the UK; and what plans he has to change these. [119614]

Ms Stuart: The General Medical Council (GMC), which is an independent statutory body, licences doctors to practice medicine in the United Kingdom, following an examination of their qualifications.

The National Health Service terms and conditions of service of hospital medical and dental staff require all career grade doctors to hold full registration with the GMC, while doctors in training should hold either limited or provisional registration.

NHS employers have a responsibility to take all possible action to ensure that all doctors they appoint are fit to practise. The Department has issued guidance reinforcing the need for pre-employment checks for doctors in the "Good Practice Guidance" issued with the "Appointment of Consultants Regulations 1996". Additionally, the Department has issued HSG(98)64 "The Management of Health, Safety and Welfare Issues of NHS Staff", and HSC 1998/212 "Children's Safeguard Review: Choosing with Care", which cover all NHS staff and advises NHS employers to ensure proper pre-employment checks are made so that employees do not represent a risk to patients.

In addition to the existing guidance, the Department plans to issue shortly a Direction requiring NHS employers to include in their application forms for doctors a declaration to be completed by applicant stating whether or not they have been or are the subject of disciplinary action by an overseas licensing or regulatory body.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119437]

Mr. Lock: So that the Cabinet Office can publish the spring 2000 report monitoring progress towards delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005 we are currently collecting data which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. The Lord Chancellor's Department currently provide a range of services electronically that include:

Just Ask!—the Community Legal Service Website.

Just Ask! provides co-ordinated access to several hundred legal information and help websites through its Advice Search feature. The site also features an electronic version of the CLS Directory, to be updated daily, containing over 15,000 entries. The Directory enables users to locate, either locally or nationally, legal service providers that can assist with the query at hand. The site is accessible through many channels. It has been built in accordance with World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) guidelines that ensure websites meet the needs of disabled users. It also features information in Welsh and six community languages (Bengali, Cantonese, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu).

Legal Services Commission (LSC)

The LSC website provides a direct information service to both the citizen and suppliers of legal aid services. Documents for the public and legal services suppliers are included on the website, these are presented with representation of published leaflets, forms and manuals. These can be downloaded by the user and there is provision for e-mail feed back to the editor.

The Court Service

The Court Service has a significant number of business areas where services are delivered electronically. The Claim Production Centre (CPC) receives liquidated default claims in electronic format. The claim data are then electronically transferred from the centre to the court of the issuing party's nomination. Notification of issue is produced and, in most cases, faxed to the issuing party. The County Court Bulk Centre (CCBC) takes the centralised aspect of the CPC and deals with all administration processes after issue of claim. All judgments are entered via electronic means. The Centralised Attachment of Earnings Payment System (CAPS) performs the vast majority of the Civil Court's Suitors' Cash function. It receives attachment of earnings order information electronically from the local court, produces and dispatches the orders to the parties and, more importantly, the employer, and then collects and monitors for payments. The Parking Enforcement Centre (PEC) was established to support business resulting from the Road Traffic Act of 1991 which de-criminalised parking offences. Participating local authorities register any claims where the parking fine has gone unpaid despite the issue of a penalty notice. If there are no objections lodged to the registration, the authority can apply to issue a warrant of execution. All registrations and applications for warrants are sent electronically. Call Centres support the CCBC, CAPS and PEC. They operate generally between 8 am and 5 pm, Monday to Friday and are supported by out of hours messaging. Court Lists (hearing dates and times) are currently provided electronically to some criminal justice organisations and to defence legal practitioners. The Court Service website is used to provide a wide range of services including:

Access to over 200 Court of Appeal and High Court judgments (selected by the judges concerned);

Access to the daily lists for the whole of the Supreme Court Group and the Crown Court;

233 court forms (which may be completed on screen) are available;

62 information leaflets or particular relevant to court users (including guidance for court users who are deaf or hard of hearing), the professions and small businesses. Eleven of the information leaflets are available in the Welsh language, as is the Court Service Annual Report;

An Introduction to the Court Service; and

Access to a large number of Related Sites.

Tribunals

Four Tribunals offer web based services, namely:

Office of the Social Security and Child Support Commissioners;

Immigration Appellate Authority;

Special Commissioners of Income Tax;

VAT and Duties Tribunal.

The range of services offered spans: explanation of tribunals' functions and standards of service; guidance as to how to appeal and for oral hearings; electronic forms; and catalogued commissioners' decisions.

HM Land Registry (HMLR)

HMLR provides a Direct Access Service which allows its Account Holders to view any computerised register online (95 per cent. of registered stock of some 16 million titles are computerised), lodge official searches, order office copies of the land register, view details of pending applications and provide electronic notification of discharge of charges. From its website, the HMLR also provides an interactive residential property price database providing details of property prices from regional down to postal sector levels. It also provides a forms library, where 44 types of Land Registry applications forms can be downloaded and used free of charge.

The Public Record Office (PRO)

The public can use the internet to

consult the catalogues of the PRO's holdings;

order documents in advance to be used in the reading rooms at Kew;

order books from the PRO's bookshop;

obtain estimates for the cost of copies of documents;

obtain information about the operations of the Public Record Office, copies of press releases and of some recently released documents; and

use the Learning Curve, the PRO's contribution to the National Grid for Learning.

Blackwell Committee

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if the committee established by the Lord Chancellor to investigate non-legally qualified claims assessors and employment advisers (the Blackwell Committee) has completed its inquiries; and when it is intended to publish its report. [120091]

Mr. Lock: The Blackwell Committee has completed its investigations into the activities of non-legally qualified claims assessors and employment advisers. The Department has today published its report and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119554]

Mr. Lock: Government sites are permitted to carry advertising, but at present there is no advertising or company sponsorship on any of the following websites:

Lord Chancellor's Department HQ

Court Service

Northern Ireland Court Service

HM Land Registry

Public Record Office

Public Trust Office

Judicial Studies Board

Legal Services Commission

Just Ask (Community Legal Service).

NORTHERN IRELAND

National Security Certificate System

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to ensure the adherence of the national security certificate system to the quality scheme under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. [117361]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The issue of national security certificates would fall with the Department's assessment of the extent to which each of its current functions, policies or duties has an impact on the promotion of equality of opportunity and the promotion of good relations within the terms of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. On 7 April, the Department published its draft Equality Scheme explaining how it intends to fulfil the duties imposed by section 75 of the 1998 Act.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his estimate of what the final cost will be of the Saville inquiry. [117572]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 6 April 2000]:* The Inquiry currently estimates that the final costs will be in the order of £65 million. That estimate is subject to revision in the light, in particular, of the duration of the hearings and the final determination of those payments to lawyers which are currently being made on an interim basis. The largest single block of expenditure is the lawyers involved in the Inquiry: these are expected to account for about two thirds of the total costs.

Ambulance Bay (Armagh)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when the ambulance bay will be provided at Constabulary House, Russell Street, Armagh City; and if he will make a statement. [119022]

Mr. Ingram: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Roads Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. C. James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from C. James to Mr. John. D. Taylor, dated 19 April 2000:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question about the provision of an ambulance bay at Constabulary House, Russell Street, Armagh.

Roads Service is currently progressing the statutory procedures required under Articles 10(4) and 13(1) of the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to authorise that a section of road fronting Constabulary House, Armagh be used for the parking of ambulances. A notice outlining our intention in this respect will be published in the local press tomorrow, Thursday 20 April 2000.

Assuming there are no objections to our proposal, we anticipate that the parking bay should be operational by the middle of June.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Forest Service

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what performance targets have been set for the Forest Service for the financial year 2000–01. [120235]

Mr. Ingram: The following key targets have been set for the Forest Service for 2000–01:

Achieve 700 hectares of new planting in public and private sectors combined

Offer for sale 340,000

Achieve 440,000 paying visitors

Maintain the forest estate under sustainable management

Approve (or reject) 90 per cent. of applications under the Woodland Grant Scheme and Farm Woodland Premium Scheme within eight weeks of receipt of a properly completed application form

Following planting, pay 90 per cent. of grant claims within eight weeks of receipt of a properly completed claim form

Complete a strategic review of NI forestry policy by 31 March 2001

Achieve an outturn which meets the targeted net cost of the forestry programme

Achieve 3 per cent. efficiency gains

Control DRC and programme expenditure to within 1 per cent. of the final control totals.

The Forest Service Business Plan for 2000–02 will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses at a later date.

Inward Investment

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many visits sponsored by the Industrial Development Board of prospective *(a)* incoming and *(b)* United Kingdom investors there were to each council area in 1998–99; and what is his (i) latest estimate of the corresponding figures for 1999–2000 and (ii) estimate of the total number of visits to Northern Ireland by potential inward investors for 1999–2000, broken down by (1) first time and (2) repeat visits. [118520]

Mr. Ingram: The table provides details of visits by potential investors to Northern Ireland District Council areas arranged by the Industrial Development Board in 1998–99.

The details for 1999–2000 will be made available with the publication of the IDB Annual Report which is expected in the autumn.

Details of first and repeat visits to Northern Ireland in 1999–2000 will be made available with the publication of the IDB End of Year Statement which is due in mid-May.

IDB promoted inward investment visits 1998–99

	Potential investor company visits	
Council area	*Overseas companies*	*UK companies*
Antrim	37	7
Ards	3	1
Armagh	2	0
Ballymena	3	1
Ballymoney	1	1
Banbridge	1	0
Belfast	52	26
Carrickfergus	7	4
Castlereagh	4	3
Coleraine	3	0
Cookstown	3	0
Craigavon	11	0
Derry	25	4
Down	5	0
Dungannon	1	0
Fermanagh	2	0
Larne	7	3
Limavady	2	0
Lisburn	30	5
Magherafelt	1	0
Moyle	0	0
Newry and Mourne	7	0
Newtownabbey	11	7
North Down	6	1
Omagh	5	0
Strabane	6	1
Total	235	64

Notes:
1. Visit elements for other than inward investment purposes, such as visits to tourist attractions, are excluded.
2. General visits to Northern Ireland not including a specific council area are excluded.
3. Total District Council visits may exceed total visits to Northern Ireland as a company visit may cover more than one District Council area.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt Relief

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to her answer of 5 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 472W, on debt collection, if her policy on giving debt relief includes discrimination between good and bad stewardship by aid recipients. [118415]

Clare Short: The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative is an international agreement and so the conditions attached to the debt relief provided under the initiative must be agreed internationally. As my answer on 5 April made clear, I am pleased that the main criterion is that the debt relief benefits the poor, with governments of HIPC countries producing poverty reduction strategies to qualify for their relief.

The internationally agreed conditions for debt relief do not discriminate between good and bad stewardship of aid in the past. In many cases, the indebtedness will have arisen, in part, from bad stewardship of aid and other resources. Regardless of past performance, very poor, heavily indebted countries can qualify for the initiative. The key test is whether current governments have demonstrated a commitment to sound policies and poverty reduction, which will include the effective use of aid resources. The HIPC initiative requires a track record of three years before countries start getting their debt relief.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of her Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of her Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119552]

Clare Short: Our website does not carry any advertising or acknowledgements of company sponsorship and we have no plans to change this policy.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Visits

Q13. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to visit the constituency of Meirionnydd Nant Conwy; and if he will make a statement. [118474]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 April. [119325]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Properties

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* the offices (i) owned and (ii) rented by his Department and its agencies in Scotland and *(b)* the number of staff (y) employed and (z) that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114237]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* My Department rents accommodation in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Details of the locations and the staff currently employed are as follows. Details of the maximum number of staff that could be accommodated at each site cannot be accurately assessed. This would depend on the configuration of the accommodation.

Location	*Number of staff employed*
Dover House, London	39
Meridian Court, Glasgow	6
1 Melville Crescent, Edinburgh	18
Victoria Quay, Edinburgh	19
50 Frederick Street, Edinburgh	3

Departmental Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117818]

Dr. Reid: The Scotland Office employs 16 qualified lawyers in the office of the Advocate-General for Scotland. It is not possible to provide a meaningful comparison with the legal staffing of the Scottish Office before devolution.

Inverness Travel-to-Work Area

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 28 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 110W, on assisted areas, if he will indicate in respect of the Inverness travel-to-work area what comparators he has used which indicate that it is an area of extremely low population density leading to additional costs in the provision of goods and services. [117763]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 5 April 2000]:* I have written to the right hon. Member and to other hon. Members with details of the Government's revised proposals for the Assisted Areas map. These proposals are also the subject of wider consultation. In formulating our revised proposals, the Government have taken account of the European Commission's guidelines, which indicate that NUTS 3 areas can be regarded as sparsely populated if they have a population density less than 12.5 persons per square kilometre.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119550]

Dr. Reid: Government websites are permitted to carry advertising but my Department has not yet decided whether to do so. Any development of the Scotland Office website will be within the framework of the e-government strategy for public sector websites.

No advertisements have appeared on the Scotland Office website, nor on the website of the former Scottish Office, so no revenue has been generated.

WALES

New Deal (Young People)

9. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the number of people who have left the New Deal for Young People and returned to state benefits within 12 months. [118443]

Mr. Hanson: Figures for Wales show that, by January 2000, 18,300 young people had left the New Deal for Young People. Of these, 2,600 (14 per cent.) moved directly to other benefits. 17 per cent. of leavers to date had subsequently made a claim for JSA within 12 months of leaving.

Local Government Reform

10. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the reform of local government in Wales. [118444]

Mr. Hanson: The Government are committed to the agenda for modernisation of local government in Wales set out in the 1998 White Paper "Local Voices". The Local Government Bill will help to secure a bigger say for local people by providing for new executive structures which will improve efficiency and accountability. It will also set up a new ethical framework, specifically tailored to Welsh needs, and empower councils to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their communities.

Health Service Reform

11. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the outcome of the meeting in Cardiff on 7 April of the Joint Ministerial Committee on reform and modernisation of the health service. [118445]

Mr. Hanson: This was a very important and very useful meeting. It showed there is a commitment from all parts of the UK to share ideas and learn from each other in order to modernise our National Health Service. The meeting also highlighted a new, shared way of working post devolution and discussed the Government's overall UK increase in NHS investment for the next four years, to raise the level to European averages.

23. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the reform and modernisation of the NHS in Wales. [118458]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I regularly meet the Assembly First Secretary and the Assembly Health Secretary to discuss the NHS in Wales. Reform and Modernisation has, of course, been on our agenda and the first meeting of the Joint Ministerial Group on the NHS in the UK was held in Cardiff on 7 April. At that meeting, chaired by the Prime Minister, ideas on modernisation were shared between Ministers from all parts of the UK.

Councillors (Remuneration)

12. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the impact of the provisions of the Local Government Bill on the cost of remuneration of councillors in Wales. [118446]

Mr. Hanson: The Local Government Bill provides for the setting up of independent panels to advise on levels of remuneration. It is not possible to assess the impact of such panels on the cost of councillors' remuneration, as the panels are independent and their recommendations are only advisory.

NHS Waiting Lists

13. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on NHS waiting lists in Wales. [118447]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I meet regularly with the National Assembly First Secretary and the Assembly Health Secretary to discuss health issues. The subject of waiting lists is often a part of our discussions. It was also discussed at the first meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee for Health held recently in Cardiff. The National Assembly has invested over £37 million to reduce waiting lists in Wales.

Learning and Skills Bill

14. **Mr. Caton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about the Learning and Skills Bill. [118448]

Mr. Hanson: I have received several representations about the Learning and Skills Bill, including from hon. Members, training providers and the industry sector.

Health Funding

15. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about health funding in Wales. [118449]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I meet regularly with the First Secretary and the Assembly Health Secretary to discuss Health issues in Wales. In the light of the recent Budget announcements we have, of course, discussed health funding specifically. However, it is for the National Assembly to decide how the additional funding allocated to Wales is distributed.

Genetically Modified Crops

16. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the policy of the National Assembly concerning genetically modified crops. [118450]

Mr. Hanson: I have regular meetings with the Assembly Agriculture Secretary Christine Gwyther and we have frequently discussed the issue of genetically modified crops.

Education Funding

17. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about education funding in Wales. [118451]

Mr. Hanson: I regularly meet the Assembly Secretaries when I discuss a variety of issues. In the light of the recent Budget announcements, I will be discussing education funding. However, it is for the National Assembly to decide how the additional funding allocated to Wales is distributed.

Sport

18. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to discuss access to sport with the First Secretary; and if he will make a statement. [118452]

Mr. Hanson: I meet the Assembly Secretaries on a regular basis to discuss a variety of issues including the development of sport in Wales.

Agriculture

19. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the recently announced support package for farmers in Wales. [118454]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The farming unions in Wales have broadly welcomed the support package for farmers in Wales which was announced at the recent agriculture summit chaired by the Prime Minister on 30 March.

20. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the First Secretary to discuss the future of agriculture in Wales. [118455]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a weekly basis and discuss a wide range of issues, including the agriculture industry in Wales. The farming summit on 30 March chaired by the Prime Minister demonstrated the Government's commitment to the future of farming, agreeing a package of measures and additional funding for farmers across the UK. This will include measures to help them adapt to the problems facing agricultural economies in the 21st century. This should mean an additional £28 million in total for Welsh farmers.

24. **Mr. Gill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to the state of farming in Wales. [118459]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a regular weekly basis and we discuss a wide range of issues including the Welsh farming industry. This subject was addressed at the Agriculture Summit chaired by the Prime Minister on 30 March, when a package of measures worth £200 million across the UK was agreed. The Finance Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales has subsequently confirmed that over £28 million of this will be available to Welsh farmers.

Education Maintenance Allowances

21. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will meet the Assembly Secretary for Education to discuss education maintenance allowances in Wales. [118456]

Mr. Hanson: I regularly meet the Assembly Secretaries to discuss a variety of issues.

There are currently 15 pilot areas in England covering a wide range of social and geographical circumstances that will allow for valid conclusions to be drawn for Wales.

Once the pilots are completed, the National Assembly for Wales will take the opportunity to consider the information collected and whether or not the scheme should be introduced in Wales.

Car Components Industry

22. **Mr. Denzil Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry regarding the consequences for the car components industry in Wales of the sale of Rover. [118457]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I discussed this matter with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry last week and have also discussed the Assembly's response with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales. I am following with interest the work of the Task Force established by the Welsh Automotive Forum and the work of the West Midlands Task Force.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

25. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the impact of the 2000 Budget on small and medium-sized enterprises in Wales. [118460]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Secretary and discuss a wide range of issues including the Budget and other related matters.

The Chancellor's Budget is excellent news for Wales. It allows the National Assembly for Wales to provide extra resources to support enterprise including help via Welsh Training and Enterprise Councils for over 1,000 new business start-ups. The Budget also sets out a substantial package of tax and spending measures that build on existing measures to help small and medium-sized enterprises up the ladder of opportunity.

Transport

26. **Mr. Donald Anderson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to meet the First Secretary to discuss the transport needs of Wales. [118461]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a weekly basis, and discuss a wide range of issues, including the transport needs of Wales.

As a result of the Chancellor's Budget, the Assembly will receive a total of £158 million additional funding in 2000–01. This has allowed the Assembly to announce additional funding of over £16 million to local authority integrated transport packages, safer community transport projects, the Transport Grant and many small-scale safety schemes.

Waterhouse Inquiry

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if the former Welsh Office civil servant, Derek Brushett, attended any of the preliminary hearings held by Sir Ronald Waterhouse to discuss procedure with the North Wales child abuse inquiry on 10 September, 15 October, 26 November 1996 and 3 January 1997. [113486]

Mr. Paul Murphy: In so far as it can be established, there is no record of Mr. Brushett attending any of the preliminary hearings in his official capacity.

An examination of the transcripts of evidence shows that he did not take part in any of the preliminary hearings.

Quangos

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the quangos in Wales, and their membership, in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1993, *(c)* 1994, *(d)* 1995, *(e)* 1996, *(f)* 1997, *(g)* 1998 and *(h)* 1999. [116338]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information given in the table provides all available details.

All non-departmental public bodies in Wales in existence between 1995 and 1999 are listed, with the number of members between 1995 and 1998 given where this information is available. Information is not held centrally before 1995, and is not yet available for 1999, as records are collected from 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000.

All of these bodies transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999.

Welsh Executive and Advisory non-departmental public bodies

Name of body	*Number of members*			
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Executive Bodies				
Agricultural Wages Committee	12	12	11	12
Arts Council of Wales	18	18	18	18
Cardiff Bay Development Corporation	14	13	11	13
Countryside Council for Wales	7	8	7	12
Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales	13	13	13	15
Development Board for Rural Wales	11	12	13	12
Further Education Funding Council for Wales	11	10	10	14
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales	10	11	7	10
Housing for Wales	6	7	[1]—	[1]—
Land Authority for Wales	8	8	8	8

Welsh Executive and Advisory non-departmental public bodies

Name of body	*Number of members* 1995	1996	1997	1998
National Library of Wales	3	3	3	3
National Museums and Galleries of Wales	4	4	4	4
Residuary Body for Wales	4	4	4	4
Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales	12	10	11	8
Sports Council for Wales	14	15	15	13
Tai Cymru	[1]—	[1]—	7	7
Wales Tourist Board	6	7	7	6
Wales Youth Agency	10	3	[1]—	[1]—
Welsh Development Agency	8	10	11	11
Welsh Language Board	14	14	14	14
Welsh National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting	7	6	7	7
Advisory Bodies				
Advisory Committee for Wales (NRA)	7	8	6	9
Agricultural Dwelling House Advisory Committees	24	24	22	20
Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales	11	10	[1]—	[1]—
Ancient Monuments Board for Wales	9	7	7	8
Hill Farming Advisory Sub-Committee for Wales	10	10	10	10
Historic Buildings Council for Wales	7	7	7	7
Library and Information Services Council	9	9	9	9
Local Government Boundary Commission	3	3	3	3
Mental Handicap Advisory Panel	9	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Place Names Advisory Committee	2	2	2	2
Staff Commission for Wales	6	6	[1]—	[1]—
Urban Investment Grant Appraisal Panel	7	6	[1]—	[1]—
Welsh Committee for Postgraduate Pharmaceutical Education	9	9	9	[1]—
Welsh Council for Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education	9	4	[1]—	11
Welsh Dental Committee	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	13
Welsh Economic Council	11	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Welsh Industrial Development Advisory Board	8	7	7	8
Welsh Medical Committee	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	28
Welsh Nursing and Midwifery Committee	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	25
Welsh Optometric Committee	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	11
Welsh Pharmaceutical Committee	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	19
Welsh Scheme for the Development of Health and Social Services	14	1	[1]—	[1]—
Welsh Scientific Advisory Committee	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	17
Welsh Advisory Committee on Drug and Alcohol	[1]—	[1]—	25	24
Social Services Inspectorate for Wales Advisory Group	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	0

[1] Indicates that that particular body did not exist in the relevant year, and
[2] Indicates that the information is not available for that particular body in the relevant year

Beef

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Welsh Agriculture Secretary with regard to ensuring that beef which is imported from Europe is not labelled as Welsh Beef. [118438]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My hon. Friend and I meet regularly with our colleagues in the National Assembly to discuss a range of issues including the agriculture sector. The Assembly subscribes to the voluntary Beef Labelling Scheme which operates in implementation of an EC Regulation, and traceability is a key feature. The labels must indicate the location where birth, rearing and slaughter took place and, though labelling itself is voluntary, the rules of the scheme should be adhered to if labelling is done. There are discussions taking place within the EU to finalise the precise structure of a compulsory scheme which it is anticipated will start to operate in September.

A3XX Project

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has made to the First Secretary and the National Assembly regarding the A3XX project. [118453]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a weekly basis and have discussed a range of issues, including BAE and Broughton. I am delighted that BAE have been successful in attracting £530 million of launch investment.

Livestock Industry

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the prospects for the Welsh livestock industry. [118442]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a regular weekly basis and we discuss a range of issues including the Welsh livestock industry. This was also addressed at the Prime Minister's Agriculture Summit on 30 March which agreed the package of support and measures for the farming industry. In Wales £14.7 million

goes to the Less Favoured Areas while £10.6 million agrimonetary compensation goes to dairy, beef and sheep farmers.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

BMW/Rover

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list the requests he made for meetings with *(a)* the Chairman of BMW, *(b)* the Chairman of Rover, *(c)* the Chief Executive of BMW and *(d)* the Chief Executive of Rover between 1 November and 29 March; [117565]

(2) if he will list the meetings and telephone conversations he had with *(a)* the Chairman of BMW, *(b)* the Chairman of Rover, *(c)* the Chief Executive of BMW and *(d)* the Chief Executive of Rover between 1 November and 29 March; [117566]

(3) if he will list the requests his Department made for information to BMW and Rover between 1 November and 29 March, indicating the date in each case. [117556]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to the answers given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 14 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 289–90W, to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning).

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will be able to award regional selective assistance in Britain under an approved map. [118086]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* Payments under offers of regional selective assistance made on or before 31 December 1999 continue to be made. New offers are being made subject to approval of the Assisted Areas Map by the College of Commissioners.

Post Offices

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* Crown post offices, *(b)* franchised post offices and *(c)* sub-post offices there were in each constituency in (i) 1989 and (ii) 1999. [118772]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that they do not hold historical data for the types and numbers of post offices by parliamentary constituency. I have obtained from the Post Office a list of the information as at 1 October 1999, the latest date available, and have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

World of Leather

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of possible job losses as a result of the World of Leather chain going into receivership. [118897]

Dr. Howells: I am deeply concerned about any job losses that may arise as a consequence of the present difficulties of Uno Plc ("World of Leather"). My officials have been in contact with the administrators of Uno Plc and trade associations in both the furniture manufacturing and leather tanning sectors.

It is hoped that other furniture retailers will acquire the majority of the stores from which Uno Plc traded, although the number of staff who will be offered continued employment by the businesses acquiring those stores is presently not known.

The furniture manufacturing industry has indicated that the short term effects on employment are likely to be limited, although I understand that there have already been closures of two furniture manufacturers as a direct result of the administration of Uno Plc. Concerns have been expressed about employment in the medium term in the sector, not least arising from the effect any adverse publicity will have on consumer confidence.

The leather tanning industry has indicated that there is unlikely to be an impact upon employment in that sector.

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the extent to which the actions of the World of Leather chain towards its customers in the month prior to its going into receivership complied with consumer protection legislation. [118896]

Dr. Howells: Under the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986, the joint administrators of the company are obliged to report to me within six months of the administration order on the conduct of the directors of Uno Plc ("World of Leather"). In particular, schedule 1 to that Act requires the administrators, in making their report, to have regard to certain matters including the extent of the directors' responsibility for any failure by the company to supply any goods or services which have been paid for (in whole or in part). The contents of the administrators' report will be given careful consideration by my officials in the Disqualification Unit of the Insolvency Service.

Additionally, my officials continue to be in contact with the joint administrators of Uno Plc in response to specific concerns raised about the affairs leading to the administration of the company.

If there is any evidence that more general consumer protection legislation has been breached it will be for the appropriate authorities to consider whether to undertake an investigation.

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many contracts for *(a)* Thorp and *(b)* the Sellafield MOX plant have been signed by British Nuclear Fuels for each plant respectively. [119153]

Mrs. Liddell: Contracts and contracted terms between British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) and its customers for the supply of goods and services are commercial matters for the parties concerned.

BNFL has contracts with customers in the UK and Japan, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Canada to reprocess spent nuclear fuel at the Thorp plant.

As regards contracts for the Sellafield MOX plant, I refer my hon. Friend to the report produced by PA Consulting for the Environment Agency, entitled "Assessment of BNFL's Economic Case for the Sellafield Mox Plant", copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

BNFL is continuing to pursue reprocessing and MOX fuel business opportunities.

Ofgem

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to advise Ofgem to take action against gas suppliers which breach Standard Condition 2 of the Gas Suppliers' Licence; and if he will make a statement. [118931]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 13 April 2000]:* It is for Ofgem to determine whether enforcement action against suppliers for breach of Standard Condition 2 is necessary. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will bring to the attention of the Director General of Ofgem the matter raised by the hon Member.

Shareholder Remedies

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce the results of his Department's consultation on its document, "Shareholder Remedies"; and if he will make a statement on what action he intends to take. [119024]

Dr. Howells: The results of the Department's consultation on "Shareholder Remedies" are being considered in the wider context of the Company Law Review. The Steering Group of the Company Law Review published a further consultation document last month—"Developing the Framework"—which included sections on shareholders and shareholder remedies. A copy of that document was made available to the House: it can also be accessed on the Department's website.

Newspaper Industry

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to investigate the level of competition in the wholesale newspaper industry. [119251]

Dr. Howells: The Director General of Fair Trading has a general responsibility to keep under review the carrying on of commercial activities in the UK. He has powers to investigate and to act where he has concerns about anti-competitive behaviour.

If anyone has evidence to suggest anti-competitive behaviour in the wholesale newspaper market they should inform the Director General of Fair Trading.

Nuclear Safeguards Bill

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what requirements will be placed upon British Nuclear Fuels to allow access by safeguards inspectors to United Kingdom-owned or originated plutonium held at BNFL sites as a result of the enactment of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill *[Lords]*. [119255]

Dr. Howells: None. Under the terms of the UK/Euratom/IAEA safeguards agreement and the Euratom Treaty, British Nuclear Fuels are already required to allow access by safeguards inspectors to all civil nuclear material they hold, including plutonium.

Rover

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effect of the closure of Rover Longbridge *(a)* outside the West Midlands and *(b)* in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [119284]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Much will depend on the outcome of BMW's negotiations with Alchemy or any other potential purchaser. These are ongoing. The Rover Task Force will be submitting an interim report to the Government shortly.

However, until these discussions are concluded and it becomes clearer what the full implications of the acquisition might be, it would be imprudent to draw conclusions about the effect that reduced working at Longbridge might have elsewhere in the UK.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for areas outside the West Midlands which will be affected by the closure of the Longbridge Rover plant to receive financial assistance for retraining and employment creation; and if he will make a statement. [119285]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government will consider this in the light of the interim report from the Rover Task Force, which will be published shortly.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what purposes the Government's aid package for employment in relation to Rover will be allocated, broken down between *(a)* retraining the work force, *(b)* grants to attract new business, *(c)* support for the eventual owners of Rover and *(d)* other purposes. [119201]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 April 2000]:* Decisions on the allocation of the aid package will be informed by the recommendations of the Task Force. I expect to receive their interim report in the near future.

Longbridge

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what money will be available in Worcestershire for reinvestment and retraining from the first £129 million package for Longbridge. [118696]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced on 17 March that the Government would contribute £129 million to support projects aimed at economic regeneration, job creation, and to deal with the consequences of BMW's decision in relation to Rover.

Export Controls

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the export licences granted for strategic exports from the UK from 1 January to *(a)* Zimbabwe, *(b)* Uganda, *(c)* Rwanda, *(d)* Burundi, *(e)* Angola and *(f)* Namibia. [118946]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated. Between 1 January 2000 and 5 April 2000, 15 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs), and no Open Individual Export Licences, were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in the specified countries of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. One SIEL covered the export to Angola of goods with the rating PL5033, one SIEL covered the export to Uganda of goods with the rating PL5031, and 13 SIELs covered exports to Zimbabwe; information on the SIELs covering exports for Zimbabwe is set out in the table. Licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings; where this is so, the licence is included in the table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Standard Individual Export Licences issued between 1 January 2000 and 5 April 2000 covering the export to Zimbabwe of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Goods covered by the SIEL*
ML1	4
ML2	1
ML6	1
ML10	7
PL5017	1

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 307–08W.

In addition, Uganda and Zimbabwe are permitted destinations on certain Open General Export Licences covering the export of goods on the Military List; copies of all Open General Export Licences are routinely placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the most recent export licence for defence-related equipment was issued for export to *(a)* Saudi Arabia, *(b)* Kuwait, *(c)* Malaysia, *(d)* Zimbabwe, *(e)* Indonesia, *(f)* Iran, *(g)* Pakistan, *(h)* Yemen and (j) India; what each was for; how many licences for exports to each of those countries were granted in the last five years, and for what purpose; and if he will make a statement. [119479]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated. Between 1 January 1995 and 1 May 1997, 2,376 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in the specified countries of goods listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. In this period there were no such SIELs issued to Iran.

As regards export licences granted for the export of military goods to the specified countries between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1998, details of export licensing decisions in this period were set out in the Government's Annual Reports published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in March and November 1999. The Reports give details of the military equipment licensed for export during the periods as well as the ratings of these goods. Similar details of the military equipment licensed in later years will be set out in the relevant Annual Reports.

As regards licences granted since 1 January 1999, the Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated. Between 1 January 1999 and 5 April 2000, 1,221 SIELs have been issued covering the export of goods on the Military List. A breakdown of the licences issued between 1 January 1995 and 1 May 1997 and between 1 January 1999 and 5 April 2000 are set out in the tables.

Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings; where this is so, the licence is included in the Table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Standard Individual Export Licences issued between 1 January 1995 and 1 May 1997 covering the export to the specified countries of goods on the Military List

	Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating							
Rating	*India*	*Indonesia*	*Kuwait*	*Malaysia*	*Pakistan*	*Saudi Arabia*	*Yemen*	*Zimbabwe*
ML1	26	5	25	23	75	21	1	37
ML2	12	6	6	34	5	4	0	2
ML3	31	4	12	5	27	6	1	5
ML4	18	1	8	37	18	5	0	2
ML5	42	7	16	24	9	7	0	1
ML6	9	26	12	40	8	12	0	4
ML7	5	2	9	13	4	2	0	1
ML8	4	0	2	1	0	1	0	0
ML9	106	1	5	11	35	7	1	0
ML10	491	41	29	52	33	15	0	15
ML11	180	33	34	76	47	51	7	3
ML13	4	8	2	6	13	3	0	0
ML14	6	7	5	16	3	1	0	0
ML15	25	11	16	17	10	11	0	1
ML16	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ML17	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
ML18	42	1	2	1	20	2	0	0
ML21	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ML22	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
ML23	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Standard Individual Export Licences issued between 1 January 1995 and 1 May 1997 covering the export to the specified countries of goods on the Military List

	Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating							
Rating	*India*	*Indonesia*	*Kuwait*	*Malaysia*	*Pakistan*	*Saudi Arabia*	*Yemen*	*Zimbabwe*
ML24	1	5	2	5	0	1	0	0
PL5001	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
PL5002	1	1	1	3	0	1	0	2
PL5006	7	4	0	7	0	1	0	0
PL5017	15	1	6	7	11	4	0	1
PL5018	10	0	14	6	12	4	2	42
PL5021	32	0	6	1	4	0	2	4
PL5027	2	3	0	2	0	2	0	0
PL5028	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
PL5030	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
PL5031	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0

Standard Individual Export Licences issued between 1 January 1999 and 5 April 2000 covering the export to the specified countries of goods on the Military List

	Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating								
Rating	*India*	*Indonesia*	*Iran*	*Kuwait*	*Malaysia*	*Pakistan*	*Saudi Arabia*	*Yemen*	*Zimbabwe*
ML1	9	2	0	4	11	2	2	0	6
ML2	6	2	0	3	10	1	2	0	8
ML3	9	3	0	1	9	1	3	0	1
ML4	7	0	0	7	8	6	3	0	0
ML5	116	3	0	7	12	4	4	1	0
ML6	8	0	0	0	4	5	1	0	2
ML7	1	1	0	10	4	0	1	0	0
ML9	60	2	0	4	7	8	5	0	0
ML10	490	11	0	5	23	11	5	0	8
ML11	111	2	2	9	29	7	10	1	1
ML13	10	0	1	0	6	1	1	0	1
ML14	6	1	0	3	3	0	3	0	0
ML15	7	1	0	5	8	2	3	0	0
ML16	16	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	0
ML17	1	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0
ML18	7	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0
ML21	6	0	0	1	9	0	2	0	0
ML22	15	0	0	5	4	2	1	0	0
PL5001	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
PL5006	5	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	0
PL5014	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PL5017	30	0	0	7	13	5	4	0	3
PL5018	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Date of most recent SIEL and rating	3/4/2000 ML1, PL5017	21/3/2000 ML10	25/5/1999 ML13	22/3/2000 PL5001	29/3/2000 ML2	6/10/1999 ML22	4/4/2000 ML1	26/6/1999 ML11	28/3/1999 ML2

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 307–08W.

As regards Open Individual Export Licences, I shall write to the Member as soon as possible and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

In addition, India, Kuwait, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Zimbabwe are permitted destinations on certain Open General Export Licences covering the export of goods on the Military List; copies of all Open General Export Licences are routinely placed in the Library of the House.

Finally, it would entail disproportionate cost to compile information on the end-user for all of the licences shown in the Tables, and to make any inquiries necessary under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will introduce legislation to register arms brokers before autumn 2000; and if he will make a statement. [119052]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The Government will announce their proposals for new export control legislation, including proposals on trafficking and brokering, following conclusion of the review of the proposals in the White Paper on Strategic Export Controls (Cm 3989) in the light of the responses received. The Government are committed to introducing new legislation on strategic export controls when time is available in the legislative programme.

Compensation Claims

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the average payment made per client to date to each firm of solicitors in Yorkshire involved in the compensation claims for *(a)* chest disease and *(b)* vibration white finger. [119406]

Mrs. Liddell: The information is given in the table.

Solicitor	Number of claims settled	Total fees (£)	Average fee payment made per claim (£)
(a) Chest Disease:			
Ashton Morton Slack	10	8,656.25	865.63
Attey Dibb and Clegg	6	6,345.00	1,057.50
Beresfords	5	5,287.50	1,057.50
Burton Green Williamson	1	1,057.50	1,057.50
Elliott Mather	2	2,115.00	1,057.50
Frank Allen Pennington	1	1,377.50	1,377.50
Graysons	291	307,516.38	1,056.76
Hickmotts	5	5,287.50	1,057.50
Hopkins	41	46,038.50	1,122.89
Irwin Mitchell	63	66,622.50	1,057.50
John E. Millar and Company	2	2,115.00	1,057.50
Keeble Hawson Moorhouse	32	33,840.00	1,057.50
Malcolm C. Foy	1	1,057.50	1,057.50
Nelson and Co.	5	5,561.96	1,112.39
Oxley and Coward	4	4,300.35	1,075.09
Raleys	227	240,068.50	1,057.57
Saffmans	8	9,584.02	1,198.00
Simpson Millar	2	2,115.00	1,057.50
The Beaumont Partnership	1	1,057.50	1,057.50
Thompsons	47	47,675.70	1,014.38
Towells	85	88,470.29	1,040.83
W. Brook and Co.	1	1,057.50	1,057.50
(b) Vibration White Finger:			
Alfred Sevier and Sons	1	952.75	952.75
Arthur Jackson and Co.	3	5,011.39	1,670.46
Ashton Morton Slack	168	106,729.74	635.30
Atherton and Godfrey[1]	2	7,796.63	3,898.33
Attey Dibb and Clegg[1]	188	228,938.08	1,217.76
Bell Wright and Dallman	1	929.00	929.00
Beresfords	10	15,803.07	1,580.31
Burton Green Williamson	1	1,193.75	1,193.75
Elliott Mather	1	1,946.00	1,946.00
Frank Allen Pennington	91	80,837.72	888.33
Graysons	120	115,305.16	960.88
Hickmotts[1]	22	26,075.83	1,185.27
Hopkins[1]	20	43,157.54	2,157.88
Ian Smith and Co.	1	806.23	806.23
Irwin Mitchell[1]	104	113,473.04	1,091.09
Jack Thornley and Partners[1]	1	917.50	917.50
John E. Millar and Company[1]	1	5,130.35	5,130.35
Kate Patterson[1]	1	5,916.07	5,916.07
Keeble Hawson Moorhouse[1]	111	99,114.52	892.92
Kenyon Son and Craddock	1	705.00	705.00
Mills Kemp and Brown	2	4,400.12	2,200.06
Moorish and Co.	9	11,104.87	1,233.87
Newman and Bond	1	976.80	976.80
Noonan and Co.	1	1,202.50	1,202.50
Oxley and Coward	237	228,158.17	962.69
Parker Rhodes	15	13,154.53	876.97
Peace and Co.	2	2,459.09	1,229.55
Raleys[1]	571	548,047.99	959.80
Rowley Ashworth	2	2,215.00	1,107.50
Saffmans[1]	105	116,782.61	1,112.22
Taylor Bracewell	1	831.47	831.47
Towells	116	103,088.13	888.69
Wake Smith	4	2,853.91	713.48
Whittles[1]	4	2,191.59	2,191.59

[1] Include fees paid in relation to individually negotiated litigated claims which were settled outside the Handling Arrangement agreed between the Department and Claimants' solicitors.

Note:
All fees include Interest and Solicitors' Disbursements

Mobile Phone Networks

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to delay the final rounds of bidding for the new mobile phone networks until after the Stewart report is published. [119688]

Ms Hewitt: Bidders in the auction of Wireless Telegraphy Act Licences for Third Generation mobile telecommunications spectrum have been kept informed of the progress of the work of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones. The Government understand that the Group expects to deliver its report to the Government some time after Easter. It is planned to publish the report soon after receipt by the Government although definite dates have yet to be decided. If the auction is still in progress it is not proposed to hold any rounds between the receipt of the report by Government and its publication unless all remaining Bidders agree otherwise.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has chosen to re-tender the new round of bidding for the mobile phone network. [119687]

Ms Hewitt: The Government have no plans to re-auction Wireless Telegraphy Act Licences for 3G mobile telecommunications spectrum.

Research Intensity (Imported Goods)

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of the United Kingdom market for *(a)* high research-intensity goods, *(b)* medium research-intensity goods and *(c)* low research-intensity goods was represented by imports in the last 12 months. [119593]

Mr. Alan Johnson: In 1996 (the most recent year for which data are available) imports equalled 74 per cent. of UK domestic sales of high technology goods. As well as finished goods, these imports include components and sub-assemblies, a significant proportion of which are incorporated in UK exports (UK exports of high technology goods were £38 billion in 1996, while imports were £36 billion).

In the medium-high technology sector imports equalled 51 per cent. of UK domestic sales while medium-low technology and low-technology imports both equalled 25 per cent. of domestic sales.

Synchrotron

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reasons the Government preferred Didcot to Daresbury for the synchrotron. [119315]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 21 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 480W.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when his Department's Ministers decided that Didcot was the best site for the synchrotron. [119313]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* After considering all the relevant factors.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when his Department first wrote to Wellcome suggesting Didcot for the synchrotron. [119316]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the evidence given to the Science and Technology Select Committee by the Director General of the Research Councils on 8 December 1999 and by the Director of the Wellcome Trust on 15 December 1999.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the correspondence between his Department and Wellcome over the location of the new synchrotron. [119314]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The correspondence between my Department and the Wellcome Trust contains information given in confidence and as such is exempt from disclosure under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Industrial Diseases

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many ex-miners from *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK claiming compensation for chronic bronchitis and emphysema have died before their claims were fully processed. [119558]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 10 April IRISC, the Department's claims handler had been informed of 4,203 claims where the date of death recorded occurred since the date of claim. Of these 341 are in Scotland.

In all these cases the claims will be continued by the claimant's widow or dependants. In addition, where the claimant's death certificate shows that one of the respiratory diseases for which British Coal were found liable either caused or materially contributed to the death, the Department will also make a bereavement award to the claimant's widow.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many of the claims received from ex-miners in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK for compensation for chronic bronchitis and emphysema have been fully processed. [119559]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 9 April, the Department had made a total of 1,949 full and final payments totalling some £5.4 million, of which 345 totalling £900,000 have been to Scottish ex-miners. In addition, the Department has made a further 18,000 interim and bereavement award payments totalling £50.6 million, of which 1,308 totalling £3.1 million have been to Scottish ex-miners and their families.

Consumer Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Consumer Affairs Council held in Luxembourg on 13 April; and if he will make a statement. [119587]

Dr. Howells: The Council adopted a Resolution to establish a Community-wide network for settlement of consumer disputes. This European extra-judicial network will be known as EEJ-Net.

The Commission presented its strategy paper for boosting consumer confidence in e-commerce through encouragement of business best practice (in particular the development of codes of practice), effective out of court dispute settlement (EEJ-Net) and guaranteed access to legal redress through the courts in the consumer's own member state.

An orientation debate was held on the Commission's proposals for a European Food Safety Agency following last year's Food Safety White Paper; the Commission is now considering delegates' comments with a view to presenting formal proposals in September/October.

The Commission presented reports on the implementation and enforcement of both the Timeshare and Package Travel Directives and on progress in the negotiations for a Directive on the Distance Marketing of Financial Services.

The Presidency described plans for a forthcoming conference on globalisation, regulation and self-regulation. Denmark presented ideas for a new strategy to strengthen consumer policy in the EU.

Oil and Gas Exploration (Scotland)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will suspend new drilling for oil and gas in the seas west of Scotland until the full implementation of the European Habitats Directive. [119592]

Mrs. Liddell: No. I am of the view that all existing consents to drill oil and gas wells to the west of Scotland are compatible with the requirements of the Habitats Directive. It has been concluded after extensive study and consultation that these wells are unlikely to have significant impacts on the environment generally and in particular any species or sites that might be protected under the Directive or indeed any other wildlife in the area.

MOX Fuel

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 5 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 476W, if he will place a copy of the English translation of the Kansai report in the Library. [119681]

Mrs. Liddell: I have arranged for copies of the unofficial English translation of Kansai Electric's interim report on its investigation into the falsification of quality assurance data for MOX to be placed in the Library of the House. This translation of its report has not been approved by Kansai Electric.

Domestic Gas Supply

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many houses in the UK he estimates are not connected to the domestic gas supply network; which *(a)* regions and *(b)* constituencies have the highest proportion of such houses; and what plans he has to encourage gas suppliers to increase connections. [119603]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 18 April 2000]:* The information requested is not held centrally. The question of gas suppliers increasing connections is one for the Director General of Gas and Electricity Markets. He has duties under the Gas Act 1986 (as amended) to exercise his relevant functions to ensure that reasonable demands for gas conveyed through pipes are met where it is economical, and that there is effective competition in the conveyance of gas to new areas. There are some seven Public Gas Transporters (PGTs). A consumer seeking a gas connection can either seek a connection from a PGT, purchase and lay the pipe himself, or his PGT can use

the system of supplemental charges whereby the cost of connection is recovered over a protracted period through an additional charge on each unit of gas supplied.

Liquid Petroleum Gas

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many suppliers of liquid petroleum gas operate in the UK; what is the market share of each; what was the average price per litre of gas supplied in the most recent year for which figures are available; and what plans he has to bring this market within the remit of the regulator. [119604]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 18 April 2000]:* There are around 16 liquid petroleum gas (LPG) suppliers in the UK. On the market share of individual companies , I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 775W.

The average price paid for LPG by manufacturing industry in Great Britain in 1999 is provisionally estimated at £145.11 per tonne. My Department regularly publishes quarterly estimates of prices paid by manufacturing industry for LPG in the monthly bulletin "Energy Trends".

There are no plans to bring the LPG market within the remit of the gas regulator, the Director General of Gas Supply.

Communications Reform

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on consultation on the Communications Reform White Paper. [120230]

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I encourage anyone with ideas or thoughts on the substance of the White Paper to submit them to us, either in writing or via our e-mail address

consultation@communicationswhitepaper.gov.uk

by 23 June 2000.

Unless contributors make clear that they do not want their contributions to be published, we intend to place most of the material submitted to us on our website. We hope that this will generate further comment and debate as we prepare the main messages of the White Paper.

Fireworks Injuries

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the fireworks injuries statistics for 1999; and if he will make a statement. [120231]

Dr. Howells: The total number of persons recorded as attending hospital casualty departments in Great Britain during the 1999 bonfire night period was 1,056. This represents an increase of just over 21 per cent. on the previous year's total of 831. However, injuries in 1999 were still at a lower level than those recorded in the mid 1990s. Also firework sales were approximately 40 per cent. higher in 1999 than for the same period in 1998.

During the millennium period 327 persons required treatment at hospital casualty departments. This suggests that the Government's warning about the dangers of mixing alcohol and fireworks was taken very much to heart.

There were no deaths from fireworks in 1999.

I am arranging for draft copies of the injury figures together with the analytical and regional tables to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses as well as on the DTI website (www.dti.gov.uk) and hard copies will be published shortly as will details of the millennium injuries.

United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to conduct the quinquennial review of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority. [120230]

Mrs. Liddell: In line with the Government's policy of reviewing Executive Agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies at regular intervals, my Department intends to conduct the quinquennial review of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) during the course of this year with the aim of completing it by the end of March 2001. This is five years after the UKAEA assumed its current form following the separation of AEA Technology. The review will be forward-looking, open to external input and take full account of the views of all stakeholders.

The quinquennial review will be conducted in two stages. The first will look at options for the future delivery of functions provided by the UKAEA. The second will consider future performance requirements for delivery of those functions. In both cases the focus will be on corporate organisational and strategic issues, not on specific site-related operational matters. A copy of the terms of reference for the review has been placed in the Library of the House.

The review will be carried out by my officials with advice from a Steering Board chaired by the Director General of Energy in my Department. The Board will include representatives of UKAEA, other Government Departments and external, independent members with relevant knowledge and expertise. UKAEA customers, staff, trade unions and all other interested parties will have the opportunity to contribute to the review. I very much hope they will do so.

Further information on the review, including how to contribute, can be obtained from the UKAEA Quinquennial Review Team, Department of Trade and Industry, Room 107, 1 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0ET or from the DTI website at www.dti.gov.uk. Comments on the review and requests for further information can also be sent to ukaeareview.comment@dti.gov.uk.

The review will be carried out as openly as possible and the results of each stage made public. Contributors to the review should make clear whether they have any objections to publication of their comments, including publication on the DTI website.

Weights and Measures Laboratory

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what targets he has set his Department's National Weights and Measures Laboratory for 2000–01. [120295]

Mr. Byers: I have set the National Weights and Measures Laboratory the following quality of service and efficiency targets for 2000–01:

Financial Targets

To report a break-even situation in the Income and Expenditure Account 2000–01.

To meet the net vote target in 2000–01.

To ensure that total overhead costs are less than 55 per cent. of total costs.

To increase non-DTI income by 15 per cent.

Operational Targets

To complete 90 per cent. of European type approvals within 10 weeks.

To complete all European type approvals within an average of seven weeks.

To complete 95 per cent. of all calibration jobs (including preparation of certificates) within 18 working days of acceptance of the work and to achieve an average completion time of less than 14 days.

To meet 70 per cent. of the milestones by their due date in the work programme agreed between the NMSPU and NWML.

80 per cent. of customers rate NWML's provision of services as satisfactory or better.

Questions delegated to the Chief Executive.

Chief Executive to reply within 10 working days to all letters from Members of Parliament delegated to him for reply.

I have placed copies of the Corporate Plan in the Libraries of the House.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 1 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 537W, what plans he has to set separate renewable energy generation targets for each of the UK standard regions; and if he will make a statement. [119692]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government Offices for the Regions are initiating work to prepare regional assessments and targets for renewable energy provision based upon, and where necessary updating, existing resource studies. On 9 February, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) published "Guidance on Preparing Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks". The guidance indicated that the Government hope that the frameworks will draw upon this work and elaborate a regional approach to renewable energy, including regional targets flowing from the assessments of each region's capacity to generate electricity from a range of different sources. The Government would like to see frameworks in place in all regions by the end of 2000.

The frameworks will work alongside Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) and Regional Development Agencies' Economic Strategies in promoting sustainable development. We are encouraging regional planning bodies to set targets in RPG for the structure plan and unitary development plan areas within the region consistent with the regional targets provided by the regional sustainable development frameworks. Advice on this will be set out in the final version of the revised "Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) Note 11: Regional Planning" to be published by DETR shortly.

Together with the national planning policy guidance in "PPP 22: Renewable Energy", RPG—as taken forward through structure plans and Part 1 unitary development plans—will provide a strategic framework for policies and proposals for renewable energy development in local plans, including the identification in those plans of suitable sites. This, in turn, will feed through to decisions on individual planning applications.

More positive planning at regional and local levels will contribute to greater public familiarity with, and acceptance of, prospective renewable energy developments. It remains important, however, for operators to prepare the ground with local authorities, environmental organisations and local people before formal planning applications are submitted and to develop proposals in consultation with them.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Statistics

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the increase in the number of pensioners entitled to the Minimum Income Guarantee as a result of the Budget in *(a)* the Basildon parliamentary constituency, *(b)* Basildon and *(c)* Thurrock. [117053]

Mr. Bayley: The number of pensioners who will benefit from the recent increases in benefit rates is listed in the table.

Number of pensioners currently entitled to the Minimum Income Guarantee

	Number
Basildon parliamentary constituency	2,700
Basildon local authority	4,400
Thurrock local authority	2,800

Source:
November 1999 Quarterly Statistical Enquiry

We also estimate that over 500,000 pensioners in total will benefit from the increased capital limits in the Minimum Income Guarantee, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Estimates of pensioners newly entitled to benefit because of these changes are not available at constituency level.

Disabled People

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people on Incapacity Benefit have, under the innovation schemes established as part of the New Deal for the Disabled, *(a)* had any contact with one of the schemes, *(b)* applied for one of the schemes, *(c)* joined one of the schemes, *(d)* completed a placement with one of the schemes, *(e)* found part-time employment as a result of participation in one of the schemes and *(f)* found full-time employment as a result of participation in one of the schemes. [118607]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

Up until 29 February, which is the latest date for which information is available:

6,055 people have applied to join New Deal for Disabled People Innovative schemes;

3,079 people have been accepted onto these schemes;

494 people are in, or have completed work trials;

607 people have started work;

Other disabled people have been assisted by the New Deal for Disabled People Personal Adviser pilots.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners with a final level of income below that to which they could be entitled if they could claim the Minimum Income Guarantee are disqualified from claiming the Minimum Income Guarantee. [119210]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Pensioners with income below Minimum Income Guarantee levels, disqualified due to full-time work or excess capital

Capital	*All pensioners*	*Excluding workers*
0 to 3,000	25,000	0
3,001 to 8,000	50,000	45,000
8,001 to 12,000	70,000	65,000
12,001 to 16,000	20,000	20,000
Over 16,000	90,000	85,000
Total	255,000	215,000

Notes:

1. Figures are in 2000–01 prices and benefit levels.

2. Cases are rounded to the nearest 5,000.

3. The number of cases have been calculated using the Pensioner Income Series Data based on the 1997–98 FRS and the Policy Simulation Model (PSM) for Income Related benefits, based on 1997–98 Family Resources Survey data.

4. Workers include pensioners and/or their partners who are in full-time work.

Recovery of Overpayments

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the cost of the Debt Accounting and Management system; and when the installation was cancelled. [119212]

Angela Eagle: Administration of benefits and recovery of overpayment is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 18 April 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent question asking what was the cost of the Debt Accounting and Management System (DAMS) and when the installation was cancelled.

The costs of DAMS are commercial in confidence.

The DAMS procurement contract with EDS was discharged in July 1999.

EDS is contracted to provide information systems IT service delivery support to the Department. This contract has not been terminated.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Capital Rules

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of amending the capital rules for disabled people to match the new level announced for pensioners. [119250]

Mr. Bayley: The cost of increasing the capital limits to £6,000 and £12,000 in the income related benefits for disabled people would be £25 million.

Lone Parents

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many initial invitation letters have been sent to lone parents in the target group for the New Deal for Lone Parents. [119248]

Angela Eagle: 514,821 initial invitation letters were sent to lone parents in the target group from July 1997 to January 2000, the latest figures available.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents whose youngest child is aged five years and three months or over are in receipt of Income Support. [119245]

Angela Eagle: The number of lone parents on Income Support in Great Britain with a youngest child aged five years and three months or over is 470,000.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, November 1999.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents, under the New Deal for Lone Parents, have secured employment in each month since the scheme began, broken down into *(a)* target and *(b)* non-target groups. [119247]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Information for National Phase—October 1998 to January 2000

National Programme	*Target group*	*Non-target group*	*Total*[1]
October 1998	16	7	23
November 1998	802	533	1,353
December 1998	492	382	884
January 1999	792	628	1,427
February 1999	1,139	883	2,030
March 1999	1,382	989	2,383
April 1999	1,866	1,314	3,190
May 1999	1,527	1,029	2,569
June 1999	1,381	898	2,290
July 1999	1,463	1,019	2,495
August 1999	1,122	750	1,887
September 1999	1,502	1,010	2,525
October 1999	2,924	2,248	5,198
November 1999	2,577	1,910	4,509
December 1999	1,319	1,124	2,459
January 2000	1,307	800	2,133
Total	21,611	15,524	[2]37,355

[1] The total column includes those for whom target/non-target is not recorded, for this reason the columns do not sum to the total.

[2] The total figure differs from the total figure quoted in the Statistical First Release (SFR) due to rounding in the SFR.

During phase 1 (July 1997-October 1998) 2,473 target group and 920 non-target group lone parents obtained jobs[1]. In phase 2 (April 1998 to October 1998) a total of 2,878 lone parents obtained jobs[2].

[1] Information is not available in the format requested for phases 1 and 2 because results were kept clerically and it is not possible to accurately break them down on a monthly basis.

[2] In some cases it was not recorded whether the lone parent was either from the target or non-target group, for this reason the figures cannot be split into these groups.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119436]

Angela Eagle: So that the Cabinet Office can publish the spring 2000 report on monitoring progress towards delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005, we are currently collecting data which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002.

The Departmental website is undergoing immediate re-design to aid navigation to our key client groups: Families with Children, Working Age and Pensioners. There will also be access points providing information to support groups and journalists.

Currently, however, the Department provides a range of services electronically that include the Child Care Information System, developed in conjunction with the Department for Education and Employment and the Scotland Office, providing comprehensive information on child care broken down into geographical areas. The Department provides consultation documents, forms and leaflets over the internet. Forms available for downloading include the Retirement Pensions application form and the Statutory Sick Pay/Incapacity Benefit claim pack; leaflets include "Approaching Retirement" and "Babies and Children".

Data Matching

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the compatibility of his Department's data matching with respect to benefit fraud with Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998; what representations he has received on this subject; and if he will make a statement. [119531]

Mr. Rooker: This Department conducts data matching exercises, including services provided for local authorities, primarily to prevent and detect crime or where they are needed to provide important assistance in the proper administration of the Department's functions and the protection of public funds.

In October 1998, we published a "Code of Practice for Data Matching" in consultation with the then Data Protection Registrar. The code sets out the safeguards, including procedural safeguards, which must be followed in data matching activity under the code. We believe that these safeguards and the processing itself conform with Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights (and the Human Rights Act 1998) and the Data Protection Act 1998.

We have not received any representations about the Human Rights Act and the Department's data matching activities.

Children in Poverty

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many children were living in poverty in Shrewsbury and Atcham on *(a)* 1 May 1997 and *(b)* the most recent date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [119468]

Mr. Bayley: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave him on 20 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 453–54W.

The estimates in the answer provided on 20 March are the most recent available with the exception of estimates of the numbers of dependants aged under 16 included in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance (income-based) claims. Figures for February 1997, the nearest date prior to 1 May 1997, and November 1999, are given in the table.

Number of dependants under age 16 included in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance (income-based) claims for Shrewsbury and Atcham

	Thousand
February 1997	2.9
November 1999	2.0

Notes:

1. Numbers are taken from the Income Support/Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiries for February 1997 and November 1999, which are point in time surveys based on a 5 per cent. sample of Income Support/Jobseeker's Allowance claimants.
2. The figures include the unemployed who until 1996 were included in Income Support caseloads. Income Support for the unemployed was replaced by income-based Jobseeker's Allowance from October 1996.
3. Numbers are based on sample cases and will therefore be subject to sampling error.
4. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.
5. The local authority district is assigned by matching postcodes against the relevant 1997 version 1 and 1999 version 2 postcode directories.

Communication Aids

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assistance his Department can give to parents of children with communication difficulties for the provision of voice output communication aids; and if he will make a statement. [119230]

Angela Eagle: The Department's Social Fund provides for one-off payments by way of grants or interest-free loans to people who are receiving Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. These payments are intended to cover a variety of essential household items. The Social Fund does not meet special educational needs because it does not duplicate provision made by other Government Departments.

Child Support Agency

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the CSA differentiates between absent parents and non-resident parents for the purposes of calculating payments. [119571]

Angela Eagle: Under the Child Support Act 1991, "absent parents" are defined as parents who do not live in the same household with their children. However, many parents who do not live with their children have regular contact with them, they are not in fact absent from their children's lives. Therefore under new legislation, currently before Parliament, the term "absent parent" will be replaced by the term "non-resident parent". In practice, there is no difference between an absent and non-resident parent in the calculation of child maintenance liability.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the CSA maintenance payment is calculated as a sum to be spent directly on the children concerned; and to what extent it includes a payment to the custodial parent for looking after the children. [119569]

Angela Eagle: The basis of the current, complex maintenance calculation is the maintenance requirement, which is intended to represent the basic amount that is needed to support the child. Where the qualifying child is aged 16 or less, the maintenance requirement includes an age-related premium to reflect the fact that a child needs someone to care for them.

The complexity of the current formula makes it difficult for both parents to understand how maintenance has been worked out. In the new child support scheme, maintenance will be calculated according to the number of qualifying children. There will be no separate allowance for the cost of caring for the child.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures the CSA takes to ensure that money paid to the custodial parents for child support is spent on the child. [119568]

Angela Eagle: The Child Support Agency's (CSA) role is to establish maintenance liability and to calculate and collect child maintenance. It is for the parent with care to decide how best to use the money paid to support and care for her children: the CSA is not equipped to police family expenditure.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what powers the CSA has to check a parent's statement of income. [119573]

Angela Eagle: The current child support calculation requires a wide range of information to be obtained, including details about both parents' income. The current scheme can be frustrated by parents who fail to produce the information required. Parents may also provide false information, which can result in an incorrect assessment of liability.

If the Child Support Agency cannot obtain information about earnings from the parent, they will contact the employer for the details. If the information is still not provided, a child support inspector can arrange to visit the employer. Currently there is no penalty for failure to provide information, but it is an offence to obstruct an inspector. For self-employed cases, the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 gives the Child Support Agency access to information about earnings held by the Inland Revenue if all other measures have failed.

The new child support scheme will require substantially less information. Liability will be based only on the non-resident parent's income and the number of children for whom he is responsible. However, to ensure that this information can be obtained in all cases, two new criminal offences are being introduced in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, which is currently before Parliament, for failure to provide information, or misrepresentation of facts. The offences will apply to anyone who fails to provide information or gives false information to the Child Support Agency, for which there will be a fine of up to £1,000 on conviction.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in what circumstances the CSA does not require non-resident parents to pay 25 per cent. of their income to the CSA. [119572]

Angela Eagle: Under the present scheme, non-resident parents can be assessed to pay up to 30 per cent. of their net income in current child maintenance. However, the specific percentages will vary in individual cases. Liability is assessed on the basis of a complex calculation taking account of a variety of factors, including housing costs and the circumstances of the non-resident parent's second family. Parents who owe arrears of maintenance may be required to pay up to 40 per cent. of their net income in a combination of current maintenance and arrears.

Under the new child support scheme, maintenance assessments will be based on a simple percentage of the non-resident parent's net income: 15 per cent. for one child, 20 per cent. for two, and 25 per cent. for three or more children. Allowance will be made for children in the non-resident parent's second family, for shared care arrangements if the non-resident parent has the child to stay for more than 52 nights a year, and for those on a low income. If the non-resident parent owes arrears, he may be asked to pay an extra 5 per cent. of his net income.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what account the CSA takes when calculating maintenance requirements of money paid by the non-resident parent towards their children's maintenance. [119574]

Angela Eagle: Liability to pay child support maintenance usually begins on the day that the non-resident parent is told about the application for a maintenance calculation. However, there can be some delay between this date and the date the maintenance calculation is completed. Voluntary payments made by the non-resident parent during this period can reduce any arrears that have built up. But voluntary payments are not defined and currently have no statutory basis, which means that the Child Support Agency uses discretion in what might be considered an acceptable payment towards child maintenance. New legislation, currently before Parliament, will give statutory recognition to such payments.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out the new formula for calculating maintenance assessments for the Child Support Agency; and on what date the new formula will come into force. [119752]

Angela Eagle: We intend to introduce the new child support scheme for new cases by April 2002. Existing cases will be transferred at a later date, once we are sure that the new system is working well.

In the new child support scheme, the amount of child maintenance to be paid will be based on a simple percentage of the non-resident parent's net income. The basic rate will be 15 per cent. for one child, 20 per cent. for two and 25 per cent. for three or more. The amount of maintenance will be reduced if the non-resident parent shares the care of the child for 52 nights a week or more a year, has a second family or if his income is low. And either parent will be able to apply for a variation in liability to reflect truly exceptional circumstances.

The White Paper "A new contract for welfare: Children's Rights and Parents' Responsibilities" (Cm 4349) sets out the detailed arrangements and contains tables showing what the basic liability will be at different levels of income.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119545]

Angela Eagle: This Department's policy is to follow the guidance on advertising given in the Framework policy and guidelines for the use, management and design of public sector websites, laid down by CITU (Central Information Technology Unit).

This Department does not presently carry advertising on its websites.

The Appeals Service, which is one of the Department's Agencies, does have a list of links to commercial legal sites which are considered most useful to those that may use the site but these links are not there on a basis of any commercial agreement.

Guillain-Barré Syndrome

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the eligibility for disability benefit of people suffering from *(a)* the effects of Guillain-Barré syndrome and *(b)* long-term disability produced by Guillain-Barré syndrome. [119777]

Mr. Bayley: People with Guillain-Barré syndrome are eligible for Social Security benefits on the same basis as people with other disabling conditions.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people suffering from the *(a)* effects of Guillain-Barré syndrome and *(b)* long-term disability produced by Guillain-Barré syndrome were awarded disability living allowance in each year since 1997. [119778]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Schools Funding

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to ensure that local education authorities are able to provide the necessary matched funding to enable schools to take advantage of money provided through the standards fund. [117648]

Ms Estelle Morris: The requirement for local education authorities to contribute to the Standards Fund was allowed for in the 5.4 per cent. increase in education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for 2000–01. Most authorities have accepted in full the Standards Fund grants. In addition, Northamptonshire's schools will receive over £4 million as its share of the £290 million funding increase announced in the budget: from £3,000 for the smallest primary school, to £50,000 for the largest secondary school, to use as they see fit to drive up standards further. They will also benefit from their share of the £50 million extra in grant which we announced in November for general support of school budgets.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what plans he has to have transferred to his Department from the DETR, funding arrangements for schools in England; and if he will make a statement; [119686]

(2) what plans he has to fund schools directly from his Department; and if he will make a statement. [119685]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government intend to issue a Green Paper in the summer which will address the future funding of local authorities, including options for the funding of education.

Connexions Service

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the current annual level of public expenditure on the statutory and voluntary youth services, guidance and educational welfare; and if he will make a statement on the amount of such spending to be *(a)* retained, *(b)* transferred to the ConneXions service and *(c)* made available to ConneXions as additional public expenditure. [117245]

Mr. Wicks: *[holding answer 3 April 2000]:* The provisional figure for the level of expenditure by local authorities in England on the Youth Service in 1998–99, the latest year for which figures are available, is £267 million. It includes grants and services to the voluntary youth sector from local authority youth services. In addition, the Department for Education and Employment provides £4 million per annum to the voluntary youth services through the National Voluntary Youth Organisation Grant Scheme. Public expenditure on the careers service in England, in 1999–2000, is expected to be £228 million and on the New Start initiative, £5.8 million. Public expenditure on the Educational Welfare Service in England, in 1999–2000, is expected to be £80.5 million.

The resources for the ConneXions Service will come from the bringing together of existing resources devoted to youth support and guidance. The whole of the current careers service and New Start budgets will be routed

through the ConneXions Service. Other services will contribute to ConneXions in practical ways without a formal transfer of resources.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what is his estimate of the cost of the human resource audit referred to in Chapter 6 of the paper, "ConneXions"; [119277]

(2) when he expects to *(a)* commence and *(b)* complete the audit of the human resource implications of existing and additional advice and support services provided by his Department and other agencies, referred to in Chapter 6 of the paper, "ConneXions". [119276]

Mr. Wicks: Following the publication of the "ConneXions" document, officials from a number of Government Departments are currently undertaking an audit of the human resource implications of a range of new and existing advice and support services for young people. This study will inform the ConneXions Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group's strategy for implementing the Service and the Year 2000 Spending Review.

The estimated cost of consulting with external partners, including the cost of a specialist consultant, is £15,500.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many persons he expects to be employed in the *(a)* ConneXions Service National Unit and *(b)* ConneXions Partnerships at local learning and skills council level following the full implementation of the ConneXions Service. [119260]

Mr. Wicks: The ConneXions Service National Unit will largely be staffed by existing civil servants from a range of Government Departments but will also draw on secondees from the voluntary, youth and private sectors where appropriate. The structure of the new National Unit, including the staffing complement, will be for the new Chief Executive to determine when appointed.

At local Learning and Skills Council level, staffing will be a matter for determination by local ConneXions Partnerships.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the training of learning mentors and personal advisers in the ConneXions Service. [119264]

Mr. Wicks: The ConneXions Service will be delivered through a network of Personal Advisers—who, in the school setting, will be known as Learning Mentors. This emerging new profession will be supported by a comprehensive training programme to ensure that those moving into the Personal Adviser role have the appropriate skills and knowledge for the job. We will shortly be consulting widely on the structure of the professional and training framework for Personal Advisers.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many officials in his Department are engaged in the implementation of his proposals for learning mentors. [119263]

Mr. Wicks: For the implementation of the current programme of Learning Mentors within Excellence in Cities areas, three officials within DfEE are employed full time. A number of others are involved in the wider development of Excellence in Cities.

My Department also contains a team dealing with professional formation issues within the ConneXions Service. These issues include the role and training of Personal Advisers, who, in a school context, will be similar to Learning Mentors. The team contains six members.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his timetable is for the implementation of his proposals in respect of personal advisers in the ConneXions service. [119268]

Mr. Wicks: There will be a phased introduction of the ConneXions service from April 2001 over a two to three year period. This will allow time to recruit and train the staff needed for the service. It is expected that in the initial stages of implementation the majority of personal advisers will be drawn from existing careers service and youth service practitioners, along with others from a wide range of backgrounds in the voluntary, public and private sectors with the necessary experience and aptitude to work effectively with young people.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the start-up costs, *(b)* the running cost in each of the next three years and *(c)* the annual running cost following full implementation of the learning mentor scheme of the ConneXions service; [119275]

(2) which partners he expects to pool resources currently devoted to youth support and guidance in order to fund the ConneXions service, referred to in paragraph 6.4 of the paper, ConneXions; and what estimate he has made of the resources he expects each such partner to make available. [119278]

Mr. Wicks: The ConneXions strategy document, "ConneXions: The best start in life for every young person" sets out the key services that will contribute to the ConneXions service. These will include careers services, youth services, Youth Offending Teams, the Educational Welfare Service, Learning Mentors and Care Leaver Personal Advisers.

The whole of the current careers service budget, and also the budget for New Start, will be routed through the ConneXions service. Public expenditure on the careers service in England, in 1999–2000, was planned to be £228 million, and on New Start £5.8 million. Other partners will be expected to contribute to the ConneXions service the appropriate parts of their existing support services for young people, but funding will not be formally transferred to the new service. As a first step, local ConneXions partnerships will be mapping current provision and auditing existing resources as well as local needs. This will inform local delivery plans and decisions about the speed of implementation of the service. Once the information is available, we will be clearer on the resources local partners can make available, the level of start up costs, and the build up of running costs. We are also considering what additional resources will be needed and can be made available as part of the Government's Year 2000 Spending Review.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many personal advisers will be required for the full implementation of the proposals in the paper, "ConneXions"; [119265]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of learning mentors who will be required for the full implementation of his proposals for the ConneXions service; [119273]

(3) what estimate he has made of the cost of training enough personal advisers to implement fully the ConneXions service; [119267]

(4) what plans he has for the identification and recruitment of learning mentors for the ConneXions service; [119271]

(5) what estimate he has made of the number of persons who will be recruited as personal advisers in addition to persons already employed in the support and guidance of young people in order to fully implement his proposals for the ConneXions service. [119262]

Mr. Wicks: We are currently examining the precise numbers of personal advisers required by the ConneXions service—who, within schools, will be known as Learning Mentors, based on the needs of different groups of young people. Piloting of the service, which has just started, will provide useful information on the operation of the personal adviser, caseloads and numbers needed.

It is expected that in the initial stages of implementation the majority of personal advisers will be drawn from existing careers service and youth service practitioners, along with others from a wide range of backgrounds in the voluntary, public and private sectors with the necessary experience and aptitude to work effectively with young people.

We will ensure that sufficient resources are available to train people moving into the role of personal adviser. A comprehensive training programme will be put in place to ensure that personal advisers have the appropriate skills and knowledge for the role and meet agreed standards for the profession. To help this process we will shortly be consulting widely on the structure of the professional and training framework for personal advisers.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has for the vetting of learning mentors. [119274]

Mr. Wicks: For Learning Mentors in the Excellence in Cities programme, as with any school employee, authorities and schools should conduct all necessary background and other checks to verify the suitability of those applying to work with children and young people.

ConneXions Partnerships will be required to ensure that personal advisers employed within the ConneXions Service have met recruitment specifications. These include: ensuring that personal checks including criminal background checks have been completed prior to employment; that they have attended or agreed to attend appropriate training at a recognised centre offering approved personal adviser foundation training; and that they work effectively in the role of personal adviser to the standards agreed for the role including, for example, the practical application of equal opportunities and diversity.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many meetings he has held with proposed external partners in the Connexions Service. [119270]

Mr. Wicks: My fellow ministers and I have had a substantial number of meetings with proposed external partners in the ConneXions Service. There have also been frequent meetings at official level.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what dates the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on the Connexions Strategy has met; when it next plans to meet; and if he will list the members of the group. [119269]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has chaired two meetings of the "Bridging The Gap" Ministerial Steering Group at which the ConneXions Service—a central part of the overall ConneXions Strategy—was one of the key areas for discussion. The meetings were held on 28 September 1999 and 8 November 1999. In addition to my right hon. Friend, the members of this group are: my noble Friend the Minister of State, Department for Education and Employment; the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State responsible for Lifelong Learning; my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks); the Financial Secretary to the Treasury; the Minister of State, Home Office; the Minister for the Arts; the Minister of State, Department of Health; the Minister for Local Government and the Regions; the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security; the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales; special advisers from the Prime Minister's office and my Department; and officials from the Social Exclusion Unit. In addition I have held a number of bilateral meetings about the ConneXions Service with other Government Departments.

Senior officials from across Government have met on 16 occasions since November 1999 to consider the arrangements for introducing the ConneXions Service. Implementation issues are now being overseen by an inter-Departmental ConneXions Group which will meet for the first time shortly.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultations he has carried out with parents regarding personal advisers in the ConneXions Service. [119261]

Mr. Wicks: Personal Advisers will work with parents and carers to ensure that young people receive the right information, guidance and support at the right time. It is therefore important that we involve them in the development of the ConneXions Service. We have already sought young people's views through a range of consultation methods and we aim to do the same with parents and carers as the ConneXions pilots are rolled out. This will ensure that the service supports parents in their vital role.

Departmental Circulars

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* consultation documents, *(b)* regulations, *(c)* revised and corrected regulations, *(d)* guidance notes, *(e)* requests for statistical information in addition to form 618G and *(f)* letters from Ministers, were sent to local education authorities by his Department between April 1996 and April 1997. [118277]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* Between April 1996 and April 1997 this Department sent local education authorities the following:

	1997
Consultation papers	
Topic:	
Early Years	3
Further and Higher Education	13
Literacy and Numeracy	0
Primary Schools	3
Secondary Schools	9
School Curriculum	0
School Discipline	0
School Finance	3
School Governance	0
School Health and Safety	0
School Miscellaneous	5
School Organisation	1
School Premises	0
School Standards	6
Special Education	0
Teaching Profession	5
Regulations	87
Guidance	
Employment	9
Early Years	12
Further and Higher Education	10
Literacy and Numeracy	1
Primary Schools	5
Secondary Schools	14
School Curriculum	2
School Discipline	0
School Finance	14
School Governance	4
School Health and Safety	1
School Miscellaneous	14
School Organisation	9
School Premises	8
School Standards	17
Special Education	4
Teaching Profession	10
Data collection	
Topic:	
Further and Higher Education	4
Literacy and Numeracy	1
Primary Schools	1
Secondary Schools	2
School Curriculum	0
School Discipline	0
School Finance	1
School—General	6
School Premises	0
School Standards	0
Teaching Profession	1
Letters from Ministers	1

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* consultation documents, *(b)* regulations, *(c)* revised or corrected regulations, *(d)* guidance notes, *(e)* requests for statistical information in addition to form 7 and *(f)* letters from Ministers, were sent to schools by his Department between April 1996 and April 1997. [118278]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* Since April 1996 this Department has sent schools the following:

Topic	*April 1996 to April 1997*	*May to December 1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Consultation papers					
Early Years	0	1	0	1	0
Literacy and Numeracy	0	0	1	0	0
Primary Schools	1	1	2	1	0
Secondary Schools	2	6	5	4	1
School Curriculum	0	1	0	4	0
School Discipline	0	0	4	0	0
School Finance	0	2	2	6	0
School Governance	0	1	2	5	0
School Health and Safety	0	0	0	0	0
School-Miscellaneous	2	2	0	1	0
School Organisation	0	1	0	0	0
School Premises	0	1	0	0	0
School Standards	0	1	3	1	0
Special Education	0	2	0	0	0
Teaching Profession	5	1	4	3	3
Guidance					
Early Years	6	0	1	0	0
Literacy and Numeracy	0	0	5	15	2
Primary Schools	4	1	6	3	5
Secondary Schools	12	10	14	12	0
School Curriculum	0	0	2	14	5
School Discipline	0	1	4	2	0
School Finance	1	1	2	7	3
School Governance	0	1	2	10	1
School Health and Safety	4	1	2	3	1
School-Miscellaneous	3	2	2	8	0
School Organisation	7	1	2	5	1
School Premises	2	1	0	0	0
School Standards	6	3	3	8	1
Special Education	1	2	0	3	0
Teaching Profession	8	3	9	17	13

Topic	April 1996 to April 1997	May to December 1997	1998	1999	2000
Data collection					
Early Years	1	1	1	1	2
Primary Schools	1	1	2	2	1
Secondary Schools	1	2	3	1	2
School Finance	—	1	0	0	0
School-General	7	4	9	11	9
School Premises	—	0	0	0	0
School Standards	—	0	0	0	0
Special Education	—	1	1	1	1
Teaching Profession	—	0	0	0	1
Letters from Ministers	—	2	5	5	3

Note:
Regulations are not sent to schools

Teachers (Training Grants)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what factors underlay his decision to exclude Independent School Council schools from the ICT Training Grants scheme for teachers. [118659]

Mr. Wills: National Lottery funding for ICT training is not available to teachers in the independent sector because of the need to maintain a viable programme within the limited Lottery money available. The basis on which the New Opportunities Fund funds the training programme was set out in their Policy Directions, copies of which are available in the Libraries of both Houses. The Department is currently exploring ways in which the independent and state sector can work together in order to spread good practice in the use of ICT training.

Church Schools

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to amend the regulations governing the criteria under which church schools can veto school closure plans proposed by local education authorities. [119252]

Ms Estelle Morris: Under Schedule 6 to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, School Organisation Committees and Adjudicators are required to have regard to any guidance given by the Secretary of State when deciding whether or not to approve statutory proposals for changes to schools. The guidance on statutory proposals says that, in deciding proposals to close or reduce the capacity of denominational schools, care should be taken to consider the effect that this will have on the balance of denominational and non-denominational provision. Where the local School Organisation Committee cannot reach a unanimous decision on a proposal, it is passed to a schools Adjudicator to decide. The guidance also says that, where the relevant Church group on the School Organisation Committee has voted against the closure of a denominational school, the Adjudicator should not take a decision that will, when taken with any other related changes, reduce the proportion of such denominational places within an LEA area. We have no plans to amend this aspect of the guidance.

Capital Allocations (Cleethorpes)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total capital allocation since May 1997 to each school in Cleethorpes constituency; and if he will break down these capital allocations by category. [119469]

Jacqui Smith: The information requested is contained in the table.

School	Category of allocation	£000
Barton St. Peter's Primary	New Deal for Schools	22
Baysgarth	Schools Access Initiative	30
Baysgarth	New Deal for Schools	89
Baysgarth[1]	Surplus Place Removal	72
Bowmandale Primary	Schools Access Initiative	6
Bowmandale Primary	New Deal for Schools	8
Castledyke Primary	New Deal for Schools	54
Coomb Briggs Primary	Class Sizes	127
Coomb Briggs	New Deal for Schools	134
East Halton Primary	New Deal for Schools	33
Eastfield Infants[1]	Surplus Place Removal	11
Eastfield Junior[1]	Surplus Place Removal	11
Elliston Infants	Class Sizes	245
Enfield Primary	Class Sizes	75
Enfield Primary	Schools Access Initiative	3
Enfield Primary	New Deal for Schools	56
Goxhill Primary	Class Sizes	70
Healing Comprehensive	New Deal for Schools	182
Healing Primary	Class Sizes	81
Healing Primary	Schools Access Initiative	2
Healing Primary	New Deal for Schools	222
Humberston CE Primary	Class Sizes	56
Humberston Secondary	New Deal for Schools	10
Humberston Secondary	Energy Management	13
Humberston Cloverfields	Class Sizes	65
Humberston Park	New Deal for Schools	21
Immingham Comprehensive	New Deal for Schools	11
Immingham Comprehensive[1]	Surplus Place Removal	72
Immingham St. Andrews Junior[1]	Surplus Place Removal	24
Killinholme Primary	New Deal for Schools	49
Kirmington CE Primary	New Deal for Schools	26
Lindsey	New Deal for Schools	182
Matthew Humberstone Comprehensive	Schools Access Initiative	34
Matthew Humberstone Comprehensive	New Deal for Schools	646
Middlethorpe Primary	New Deal for Schools	19
New Waltham Primary	Class Sizes	66
New Waltham Primary	New Deal for Schools	6
Pelam Infants[1]	Surplus Place Removal	12
Queen Mary Avenue Infants	Class Sizes	86
Queen Mary Avenue Infants	New Deal for Schools	182
Reynolds Infants	Class Sizes	65
Signhills Infants	Class Sizes	67
Signhills Junior	New Deal for Schools	130
St. Joseph's RC Primary	Voluntary Aided Grant	128
St. Nicholas Primary	New Deal for Schools	64
St. Peter's CE Primary	Schools Access Initiative	3
Stanford Primary	Class Sizes	65
Stanford Primary	New Deal for Schools	78
The Leas Infants	Class Sizes	81
The Leas Infants	Schools Access Initiative	2
The Leas Junior	New Deal for Schools	39
Wooton CE Primary	Voluntary Aided Grant	84

[1] Although credit approval was allocated in respect of projects to

remove surplus places from schools in the Cleethorpes constituency, the local education authorities (LEAs) are not obliged to use the credit approval for those schools.

Note:

Other capital allocations have been made to the LEAs covered by the Cleethorpes constituency, but it is for the LEAs to decide which schools will benefit from the use of those allocations.

General Teaching Council

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the minimum qualifying period of two years teaching experience for candidates seeking election to the General Teaching Council. [119706]

Jacqui Smith: The Secretary of State has not received any representations on the minimum qualifying period to stand for election to the General Teaching Council.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the minimum information required from candidates seeking election to the General Teaching Council; and if he will make a statement. [119705]

Jacqui Smith: The General Teaching Council for England (Constitution) Regulations 1999 set out the eligibility criteria for candidates. Teachers seeking election must have qualified teacher status; must have been employed as a teacher in the 12 months preceding the election and for an aggregate of two years in the five years preceding the election; and must also not be prohibited from teaching. The electoral scheme required candidates, their proposer, seconder and five others to be on the GTC's electoral roll and in the same constituency as the candidate.

Mental Health Awareness

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to raise awareness of mental health issues among school children. [119578]

Jacqui Smith: The National Healthy School Standard (NHSS), which was launched last October, has as one of its specific themes 'Emotional Health and Wellbeing', which will include awareness of mental health issues.

The NHSS will be delivered as an integral part of the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) framework in schools. Over the next two years, through the Standards Fund, £5.7 million each year is being made available by DfEE and DH to LEAs to fund the running of Health Education Partnerships, which in turn should assist schools in the attainment of the National Healthy School Standard. £19,000 (£2.85 million nationwide) was made available to every LEA last year to help set up these partnerships.

Teachers' Pay (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to amend the law to enable the National Assembly for Wales to pursue a policy of not basing teachers' salaries on an assessment of pupil performance; and if he will make a statement. [119583]

Ms Estelle Morris: Teachers' pay is not currently devolved and there are no plans to change this. We believe that while there remains a single pay structure, the same opportunities must be available to teachers in both England and Wales to access the new pay levels.

Learning and Skills Council

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in which national newspapers advertisements for appointments to the Learning and Skills Council were placed. [119700]

Mr. Wicks: The posts of Chair and Chief Executive of the proposed Learning and Skills Council, and the Chairs and Executive Directors of the Council's 47 local arms were advertised in the week commencing 2 April. Advertisements for these appointments were placed in the *Sunday Times*, the *Mail on Sunday*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Observer*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the *Times*, the *Independent*, the *Times Education Supplement*, the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, the *Eastern Eye/Caribbean Times*, the *Nation*, the *Asian Times/New Nation*, and the *Voice*.

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to appoint the Chair and Chief Executive of the proposed Learning and Skills Council. [120233]

Mr. Wicks: The Learning and Skills Bill has received its Second reading in the Commons, thereby indicating Parliamentary support for the principle of the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has started the recruitment process for the national Chair and Chief Executive and the local Chairs and Executive Directors of the proposed Learning and Skills Council. The successful candidates will not formally be appointed to these positions until after the Bill has received Royal Assent.

Parliamentary approval for expenditure on the Learning and Skills Council will be sought in the Summer Supplementary Estimate for the Department for Education and Employment Vote (Class 1, Vote 1). Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1,285,000 will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund.

This expenditure is required to meet the cost of recruiting for key posts, together with preparatory work on information and business systems, premises and personnel arrangements for future Learning and Skills Council staff. Its urgency arises from the need to have both the Chair and Chief Executive in place as soon as possible after Royal Assent to ensure that public funds are properly protected and to enable their full participation in the planning process to ensure rapid progress to the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council in April 2001.

University Constitutions

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to consult on changes to universities' constitutions and to reform the visitorial system of disputes resolution in old universities; and if he will produce a timetable. [119678]

Mr. Wicks: The Government have asked the Higher Education Funding Council for England to ensure that all higher education institutions have in place student complaint procedures which meet the requirements set out in the report of the Dearing Committee. I understand the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education will shortly launch a Code of Practice on student appeals and complaints which will make reference to university governance. The Government will consider the position in the light of the Code of Practice and discussions with representative bodies.

Special Schools

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary special schools have been placed on special measures in each year since 1995 in each local education authority. [119538]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The number of primary and maintained and non-maintained special schools which have been placed in special measures in each local education authority area since 1995 is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries. While there are some special schools which cater for pupils wholly of primary school age, or wholly of secondary school age, there are many others which cover age ranges bridging part or the whole of the primary and secondary phases. The table does not distinguish between special schools covering the wide number of possible different age ranges. The figures in the table represent those primary and maintained and non-maintained special schools which were inspected by Ofsted during that academic year and deemed to be in need of special measures. In total, of the 609 primary schools that have been in special measures, 382 have so far come out and 41 closed. Of the 122 special schools that have been in special measures, 66 have so far come out and 26 closed.

Local Learning Partnerships

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the extent of current involvement by higher education institutions in local learning partnerships and on the future development of this involvement. [119613]

Mr. Wicks: Of the 101 Learning Partnerships now established across England, 67 directly involve higher education institutions (HEIs) as members while many others are engaging with HEIs in other ways (for example, through thematic or geographical working groups tackling specific local issues). The DfEE—alongside regional and local partners—is working to further improve links between Learning Partnerships and all those local and regional bodies with an interest in post-16 learning. I fully expect that to result in increased involvement of HEIs in the work of Learning Partnerships.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to develop performance indicators for the delivery of services by *(a)* local education authorities, *(b)* mainstream schools and *(c)* special schools to children with special educational needs. [119324]

Jacqui Smith: Education Development Plans and Ofsted inspections are used to monitor local education authorities. Annual performance tables are published for both primary and secondary schools. We are considering what if any further information could be used to measure the performance of LEAs and schools with children with special educational needs.

Adult Learning Inspectorate

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to appoint the Chair and Chief Inspector of the proposed Adult Learning Inspectorate. [120182]

Mr. Wicks: The Learning and Skills Bill has received its Second reading in the Commons, thereby indicating Parliamentary support for the principle of the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will shortly start the recruitment process for the Chair and Chief Inspector of the proposed Adult Learning Inspectorate. The successful candidates will not formally be appointed to these positions until after the Bill has received Royal Assent.

Parliamentary approval for expenditure on the Adult Learning Inspectorate will be sought in the Summer Supplementary Estimate for the Department for Education and Employment Vote (Class 1 Vote 1). Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £285,000 will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund.

This expenditure is required to meet the cost of recruiting the Chair and Chief Inspector of the proposed Adult Learning Inspectorate together with preparatory work on information and business systems, premises and personnel arrangements for future Adult Learning Inspectorate staff. Its urgency arises from the need to have both the Chair and Chief Inspector in place as soon as possible after Royal Assent to ensure that public funds are properly protected and to enable their full participation in the planning process to ensure rapid progress to the establishment of the Adult Learning Inspectorate in April 2001.

Trade Union Funding

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what public funds are available to support the educational activities of trades unions; by whom the funds are supervised; and who monitors the outcomes of their use. [119427]

Mr. Wicks: There is a £12 million Union Learning Fund (over four years) to support union-led activity on learning in the workplace and in the wider community. It is administered and evaluated by officials within the Department for Education and Employment. There are no public funds specifically available for the educational activities of trade unionists.

Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many employed young persons to date have taken advantage of the right to time off for study under the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998. [119426]

Mr. Wicks: This information is not collected centrally.

FEFC and TEC Redundancies

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what is his estimate of the cost of redundancy payments for staff of the Further Education Funding Council and individual TECs following the setting up of the national and local learning and skills councils; and if he will make a statement; [119683]

(2) how many staff will be made redundant from the Further Education Funding Council and individual TECs as a result of setting up national and local learning and skills councils. [119684]

Mr. Wicks: As the Explanatory Notes to the Learning and Skills Bill explain, we estimate that the new arrangements will lead to a reduction of between 15–20 per cent. in the total number of staff employed to administer post-16 education and training.

However, the transition to the new arrangements is taking place over a relatively long period. During this period there will be routine turnover of staff within the organisations affected as well as the opportunity to work with those organisations to manage staff numbers in such a way as to reduce the need for redundancies.

We are currently going through a detailed exercise with TECs and other organisations affected which will provide a clearer picture of numbers by the end of June. If redundancies are necessary, we are committed to working with the organisations involved to ensure that these are handled in an open, fair and sensitive way.

CABINET OFFICE

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the expenditure incurred by her Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies on *(a)* the setting up and *(b)* the operation of websites, indicating the cases in which the expenditure has been above that budgeted; and if she will list for each website (i) the topics that have been covered, (ii) the current average number of hits per month and (iii) the estimated expenditure on each web site for each of the next three years. [116203]

Mr. Stringer: My Department fully supports the e-government strategy and the Internet forms an integral part of our overall communications, publications and information strategy.

Details of the websites of the Cabinet Office, its Agencies and NDPBs, and the Central Office of Information are given in the table. The Cabinet Office has no executive NDPBs. The figures for its advisory NDPBs are included in the Department's total figures. As of 1 April 2000 the Cabinet Office only has one Executive Agency, the Government Car and Despatch Agency, so estimated expenditure for future years only covers Cabinet Office, GCDA and COI.

Cabinet Office, Agencies and NDPB websites

Name	*Set-up costs*	*Operation costs (annual)*	*Content of site*	*Estimated expenditure over the next 3 years*	*Average number of hits per month*
Cabinet Office (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk)	Not separately identifiable	£10,000 per annum for commercial webhosting service	Cabinet and its committees, ministerial responsibilities, pan Government programmes, guidance, codes and best practice	There is no planned additional expenditure	72,300
NDPBs—The Cabinet Office has no Executive NDPBs and details for its NDPBs are therefore included in the Cabinet Office's total figures above					
Central IT Unit and Information Age Government Champions (www.citu.gov.uk) (www.iagchampions.gov.uk)	CITU—£30,000 IAGC—£5,000	£20,000 to CCTA for CITU site in 1999–2000	The CITU site informs all audiences about the development of government strategy for the use of IT	£25,000 p.a. estimated	Not monitored
Her Majesty's Stationery Office (www.hmso.gov.uk)	Not available	£47,800 in total based on last year's calculations £28,800 for setting up of inforoute	Information about HMSO, the administration of Crown Copyright and access to the full text of new legislation. Inforoute is the gateway to the new Government Information Asset Register	Approx £24,500 per year	1.8 million
E-Envoy (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/e-envoy)	£5,437.50	£5,757.75 per annum	The e-Envoy website has been set up to provide information on the work of the Office of the e-Envoy. This includes strategy, monthly-updated progress reports, information on Alex Allan and the team, links and hosts the e-Forum discussion group.	£50,000 per year	460

Cabinet Office, Agencies and NDPB websites

Name	*Set-up costs*	*Operation costs (annual)*	*Content of site*	*Estimated expenditure over the next 3 years*	*Average number of hits per month*
Government Information and Computer Service (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/gics)	£32,000 inc. VAT, creation initial training and software purchase	Costs equivalent to a 1½ days pay in C2 position	The site provides comprehensive information to potential recruits to the Government Information and Communication Service about career opportunities, working practices and current competitions: electronic application procedures are under development	Not known	Not monitored
Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (www.ccta.gov.uk)	The estimated cost is under £5,000 per year. The estimated marginal cost of initially establishing the CCTA web site is under £10,000	£55,000 per annum	Services that CCTA offers and guidance on technological issues	—	Not monitored
Central Office of Information (www.coi.gov.uk/coi)	£40,000	£20,000 and all within budget	Case studies, contacts, COI service/contacts/diary, about COI, hot topics, sources of information, what's new	Estimated expenditure is planned to remain at £20,000 per annum	Not known
The Buying Agency (www.open.gov.uk/tba)	Developed in-house so costs are not separately identifiable	£3,120 per annum	The site covers a basic overview of The Buying Agency's operations. The site occasionally promotes events	—	Not monitored
Property Advisers To The Civil Estate (www.property.gov.uk)	Minimal setting up charges and the annual connection charge is £14,000 per year	External spend of £9,100, including hosting charges; and estimated internal costs of approximately £30,000	PACE's web site details its structure and services	—	Not monitored
Civil Service College (www/open.gov.uk/college)	The website was set up, at no charge to the Government, in 1995	£1,175 per annum	The site contains a full directory of courses offered by the College	An estimated cost of £3,000 per annum	Unique user hits are 2,062 and the total number of hits is 36,650

Government Computer Systems

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans the Government have to reduce the number of times each person's name and address is recorded in Government computer systems. [119475]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As part of our modernising Government agenda we are transforming the delivery of public services to fit in with the needs of those who use them. This means not only providing services in a way that fits in with people's needs but also getting rid of the paper-chasing bureaucracy of the past. We are currently developing a pilot that will be available later this year where people can record their change of address with different parts of Government electronically in one transaction.

Taskforces

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, pursuant to her answer of 30 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 204W, if she will publish a list of taskforces created since 9 December 1999. [119541]

Mr. Stringer: We have given a commitment to publish full lists of taskforces and other reviews every six months. The next list covering the period to the end of April will be published in due course.

TREASURY

Petrol

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on how the price of lead replacement petrol is arrived at. [119658]

Mr. Timms: The price of petrol is a matter for the oil companies. The duty rate for Lead Replacement Petrol is currently 50.89 pence per litre.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to publish an environmental appraisal of the second Comprehensive Spending Review; and if he will make a statement. [118858]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The White Paper reporting the outcome of the 2000 Spending Review will include an assessment of its implications for sustainable development, covering economic, social and environmental issues.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with the horticultural industry on substituting a voluntary agreement on emission reduction for the Climate Change Levy. [119293]

Mr. Timms: Budget 2000 announced the Government's intention to offer a special package of support to the horticulture sector under the climate change levy, through setting aside part of the £50 million 'energy efficiency' fund to improve the energy efficiency of the sector and through the additional of thermal screens used in glasshouses to the list of technologies qualifying for the enhanced capital allowances scheme. And to further safeguard the competitiveness of the horticulture sector while these measures take effect, the Government intend to offer a temporary 50 per cent. discount to horticulture firms.

This package of support and the 50 per cent. discount are not conditional on the horticulture sector entering any form of emission reduction agreement with the Government. The Government have been listening carefully to the views of the horticulture industry as the design of the levy has been worked up and the Government intend to continue working with the industry to maximise the environmental benefits of this package of support by improving the energy efficiency of firms in this sector.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the total carbon dioxide saving expected from the Government's original proposals for a climate change levy; and what is the saving expected from the present proposals. [119287]

Mr. Timms: The original estimate of the emission saving from the climate change levy, as set out in table 5.1 of the 1999 Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report, was around 1.5 million tonnes of carbon (MtC) a year by 2010. This estimate related to the pure price effect of the levy, and did not include any savings from the negotiated agreements with the energy intensive sectors.

The most recent estimate of the emission saving from the levy package as a whole, as detailed in table 6.2 of the 2000 Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report, is at least 5 MtC a year by 2010. This estimate now includes the savings from the negotiated agreements with the energy intensive sectors, and the savings from the refinements to the design of the levy that were set out in the 1999 Pre-Budget Report.

Offshore Financial Activity

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the sterling liabilities of offshore banking in *(a)* Jersey, *(b)* Guernsey and *(c)* the Isle of Man in 1999. [119239]

Mr. Timms: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Kidgell to Mr. Austin Mitchell, dated 19 April 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent question on the sterling liabilities of the Channel Islands and Isle of Man. I am replying in the Director's absence.

Offshore residents are excluded from the definition of the UK for the purposes of BoP estimates. Therefore estimates of offshore banking financial liabilities are not made centrally.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the annual growth of UK residents' sterling deposits *(a)* onshore and *(b)* offshore to Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man for each year from 1996. [119234]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Kidgell to Mr. Austin Mitchell, dated 19 April 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), has been asked to reply to your recent question on UK residents sterling deposits onshore and offshore. I am replying in the Director's absence.

The table below gives the annual percentage growth for UK residents sterling deposits with UK monetary financial institutions (UK banks and UK building societies). Estimates for UK residents sterling deposits with offshore monetary financial institutions are not made centrally.

End year	*Percentage growth*
1996	9.8
1997	14.3
1998	6.7
1999	2.4

Source:
ONS Sector and Financial Accounts

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect on sterling M4 and the UK money supply of British money flowing out to offshore financial institutions in Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man in the last three years. [119233]

Mr. Timms: Data on sterling M4 deposits at Channel Islands and Isle of Man institutions are published by the Bank of England in Table 8 of "Monetary and Financial Statistics". The stock data for sterling private sector deposits—the main component of M4—as at end December each year were:

	£ million
1997	19,543
1998	22,356
1999	23,755

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how monetary policy is coordinated between the United Kingdom, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. [119240]

Mr. Timms: Although the authorities in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man issue their own notes and coins, the currency used in these jurisdictions is sterling. As a result, the issue of monetary policy co-ordination does not arise.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer who receives the seigniory profit on the note issues of *(a)* Jersey, *(b)* Guernsey and *(c)* the Isle of Man. [119238]

Mr. Straw: I have been asked to reply.

The authorities in Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man issue their own notes. I understand that the profits from these note issues accrue respectively to the States of Jersey and Guernsey and to the Isle of Man Government.

Housing

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the scale of equity withdrawal from housing in 1998 and 1999. [119235]

Mr. Timms: The Bank of England estimate that mortgage equity withdrawal was -£1.1 billion in 1998 and £8.2 billion in 1999.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the value of the spectrum he plans to release for mobile phone use; and if he will make a statement. [119999]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

The total of the highest bids for each of the five third generation mobile phone licences was £21.67 billion at the end of the 139th round of bidding on 18 April.

Double Taxation Relief

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the loss of tax revenue if all those companies at present benefiting from rules to be changed by the Budget proposals on *(a)* double taxation relief and *(b)* controlled foreign companies were to move away from United Kingdom tax jurisdiction; [117398]

(2) what is the estimated yield from the Budget proposals for *(a)* double taxation relief for companies and *(b)* controlled foreign companies if all off-setting behavioural changes are ignored; [117400]

(3) what is the number of companies likely to be affected by the Budget proposals for *(a)* double taxation relief and *(b)* controlled foreign companies. [117399]

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what representations he has received from business organisations concerning the proposed changes to double taxation relief and to controlled foreign companies outlined in his Budget report; how many such representations he has received; from whom such representations have been received; what estimates have been given by business organisations concerning the cost to United Kingdom-based multinationals of the proposed changes; and if he will make a statement; [117284]

(2) pursuant to the oral statement by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, of 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 121, if he will list the companies named in representations by Mr. Peter Wyman of PricewaterhouseCoopers as likely to be adversely affected by the proposed changes to double tax relief and to controlled foreign companies outlined in his Budget report; [117281]

(3) if he proposes to revise the estimated revenue to be produced by the changes to double taxation relief and to controlled foreign companies outlined in his Budget report following the representations made by business organisations; [117285]

(4) within what range of cost to individual UK-based multinationals the proposed changes to double taxation relief and to controlled foreign companies outlined in his Budget report will fall; [117280]

(5) pursuant to the oral statement by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, of 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 121, what representations have been made to the Treasury by Mr. Peter Wyman of PricewaterhouseCoopers concerning the proposed changes to double taxation relief and to controlled foreign companies outlined in his Budget report. [117282]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answers 3 April 2000]:* The expected yield from the double taxation relief and controlled foreign company proposals is set out in Table A.13 of the 2000 Financial Statement and Budget Report. No other reliable estimates have been received. The extent to which companies will be affected will vary from year to year depending on a number of factors. The Government are determined to create the most competitive environment for business in the world. We have cut corporate tax rates to their lowest level ever but to keep tax rates low we cannot tolerate the erosion of the tax base by tax avoidance schemes and structures.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the distributional impact *(a)* of the children's tax credit and Working Families Tax Credit of £32 per week for a second adult and *(b)* if the CTC were reduced so that the cost to the Exchequer was the same as a £32 credit for a second adult. [118202]

Dawn Primarolo: As given in the reply to my hon. Friend on 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 817W, based on the full year cost of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), the cost of including an additional £32 per week within the credits for all couples already in receipt of WFTC would be about £1.3 billion before taking into account additional take-up and other behavioural effects. If the overall costs to the Exchequer were to remain the same, a cost of this magnitude could absorb the funding for the children's tax credit (CTC).

The £32 per week second adult credit would benefit all couples in receipt of the WFTC equally, whereas the CTC would benefit all families with children under 16 by up to £8.50 per week.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 340W, if he will disaggregate the number of families claiming Family Credit and Working Families Tax Credit by *(a)* income deciles, *(b)* each £5,000 of household income and *(c)* families above and below half average household income. [118231]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* For the analyses of families with the Working Families Tax Credit, I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer given on

12 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 160W. For Family Credit, the latest available estimates are for recipients in 1997–98. The distributions are given in the tables as percentages.

(a) Percentage distribution of families receiving Family Credit by quintile of net equivalised household income, 1997–98

Percentage

	Before housing costs	*After housing costs*
Bottom quintile	41	38
Second quintile	39	44
Third, fourth and top quintile	20	18

(b) Percentage distribution of families receiving Family Credit by £100 band of net equivalised household income, £ per week, 1997–98

Percentage

	Before housing costs	*After housing costs*
0 to £100	*	18
£100 to £200	63	68
£200 to £300	27	(12)
£300+	*	*

(c) Percentage distribution of families receiving Family Credit above/below half average net equivalised household income, 1997–98

Percentage

	Before housing costs	*After housing costs*
Above half average income	61	50
Below half average income	39	50

Notes:

1. The information comes from the "Household Below Average Income" (HBAI) data set for 1997–98, based on the Family Resources Survey, and relate to Great Britain.
2. The estimates are presented on household income both Before Housing Costs and After Housing Costs, in line with HBAI conventions.
3. All the estimates in the table relate to families in receipt of Family Credit, and are based on their incomes recorded in the survey, not at the time of claim. The are also based on incomes equivalised using the McClements scale. Equivalised incomes are equivalent to cash incomes for couples with no children. The results in table (b) are particularly sensitive to the choice of scale.
4. All the estimates are subject to sampling error. Groups have been aggregated due to small sample numbers. In particular, this has led to decile groups being aggregated to quintile groups in table (a). Results are not reliable for cells with small sample sizes: cells with sample sizes under 50 are marked with an asterisk (*). Results for cells based on samples of 50 to 100 benefit units are bracketed.

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 340W, how many of those families claiming Working Families Tax Credit in each month since its introduction would have been entitled to family credit. [118232]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 April 2000]:* I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), gave him on 3 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 340W.

Given the difference in income rules in relation to maintenance and the fact that it is not possible to isolate behavioural effects (such as the number of families who may have entered work or increased their hours because Working Families Tax Credit provides a more generous work incentive than Family Credit) it is not possible to determine whether individual Working Families Tax Credit recipients in each month would have been entitled to Family Credit.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons it is necessary for claimants of working families tax credit who are paid monthly to provide more evidence of earnings than claimants who are paid weekly. [119739]

Dawn Primarolo: Working Families Tax Credit is based on a snapshot of a family's income immediately before the claim and is paid for a fixed period of 26 weeks. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that the period over which normal earnings are considered is representative. For weekly-paid applicants, the set period is six weeks in the seven weeks immediately before the week in which the application is made. For monthly-paid people, the set period is the three months before the application. These periods should provide a representative picture in arriving at the applicant's normal earnings. Although monthly-paid staff are asked to provide evidence of pay over a three month period they need only provide three payslips whereas weekly-paid staff are required to provide six payslips.

Ms Buck: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families have been awarded working families tax credit in each local authority area in London. [119829]

Dawn Primarolo: Up to the end of March 2000, there had been 76,200 awards made of the Working Families' Tax Credit (WFTC) in the London Government Office Region. Available figures by local authority are given in the table.

Local authority	*Estimated number of WFTC awards made to end March 2000* [1]
Barking and Dagenham	2,100
Barnet	2,000
Bexley	1,400
Brent	3,100
Bromley	2,000
Camden	1,600
Croydon	4,000
Ealing	3,100
Enfield	2,900
Greenwich	2,800
Hackney	3,300
Hammersmith and Fulham	1,200
Haringey	2,500
Harrow	1,400
Havering	2,000
Hillingdon	2,100
Hounslow	2,600
Islington	1,800
Kensington and Chelsea	1,000
Kingston-upon-Thames	700
Lambeth	4,400
Lewisham	3,600
Merton	1,800
Newham	4,500
Redbridge	1,600
Richmond-upon-Thames	700

Local authority	Estimated number of WFTC awards made to end March 2000 [1]
Southwark	3,300
Sutton	1,800
Tower Hamlets	4,100
Waltham Forest	2,800
Wandsworth	2,300
Westminster and City of London[2]	1,700

[1] All figures are rounded to the nearest hundred. The estimates for constituencies in Great Britain are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are subject to sampling error. For example local authorities with 500 awards could be in the range 300 to 700.

[2] A single estimate is given for Westminster and the City of London as there are too few sample cases in the latter for a reliable estimate to be made.

Income Tax (Pensioners)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people over pensionable age in the UK paid income tax in 1999 [118835]

Dawn Primarolo: It is estimated that the number of pensioners[1] who are liable to income tax in 1999—2000 is 4.0 million.

This estimate is based on the 1997—98 Survey of Personal Incomes and is consistent with the March 2000 Budget.

[1] Women aged 60 and over, men aged 65 and over.

Personal Data

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what items of personal data his Department routinely obtains from public utilities and other Government Departments for data matching exercises undertaken in his Department. [119529]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue obtains personal data, under its statutory information powers, from a variety of third parties and collates this data by reference to individual records. It does provide personal data, as permitted by Social Security legislation, to the Department of Social Security for data matching by that Department to prevent and detect crime; to check the accuracy of their information; or to protect public funds.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the compatibility of his Department's data matching with respect to benefit fraud and tax evasion with Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998; what representations he has received on this subject; and if he will make a statement. [119527]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue obtains personal data, under its statutory information powers, from a variety of third parties and collates this data by reference to individual records. It does provide personal data, as permitted by Social Security legislation, to the Department of Social Security for data matching by that Department to prevent and detect crime; to check the accuracy of their information; or to protect public funds.

The Inland Revenue has not received any representations on data matching and Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what Code of Practice covers his Department's data matching activities; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [119528]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue obtains personal data, under its statutory information powers, from a variety of third parties and collates this data by reference to individual records. It does provide personal data, as permitted by Social Security legislation, to the Department of Social Security for data matching by that Department. This data matching is governed by their published "Code of Practice for Data Matching".

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what items of personal data, not related to PAYE arrangements, his Department routinely obtains from the London Borough of Waltham Forest; and if he will make a statement. [119530]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue obtains information from the London Borough of Waltham Forest under its statutory information powers. This information comprises all payments for services rendered to the borough, all payments made under grants or subsidies, all licences, registers and approvals and payments under leases and related obligations.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119434]

Dawn Primarolo: So that the Cabinet Office can published the spring 2000 report monitoring progress towards delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005 we are currently collecting data which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. I do not want to pre-empt that report, but I can say that we currently provide a range of services electronically that include:

Customs and Excise

(i) The following services are currently available electronically online (by Electronic Data Interchange—EDI)

Customs Exports and Imports declarations
Intrastat declarations
VAT EC Sales Listing declarations

Also available now, in the internet, are:

provision of departmental information via our website
Intrastat declarations
VAT return pilot (2,000 traders)

(ii) The following services are planned to be available online on the internet by 2002:

VAT return (full operation starting with 100,000 traders in January 2001)
VAT registration
VAT EC Sales listings
Climate Change Levy
Insurance Premium Tax
Customs (Third Country exports) declarations
Beer, wine, cider duty
Tobacco Products duty

Government Actuary's Department (GAD)

(i) The following services are currently available online and via the GAD website

I. Public access to GAD staff via external e-mail and for correspondence to clients.

II. Population Projections (1998)

III. Command Documents and Publications written by Government Actuary staff

IV. Portal to other Government Departments via open.gov.uk

V. Recruitment Details

VI. Contacts and Organisational Structure of GAD

Press Releases

(ii) The following services are planned to be available online via the Internet by 2002

Public access to Annual Report and Public Service Agreement
Public Sector Pension Services Catalogue
International Services Catalogue
Proforma Passport for contracting out of services
Best Practice Guidance
Marital Conditions Projections and Annual Life Tables
Desktop Internet Access for all staff
Remote e-mail access for all staff
Further Population Projections (2000 and 2002)
GAD Vacancy Notices and online application
The provision of bespoke Actuarial calculation software to clients (e-commerce) is currently under investigation.

Royal Mint

The Royal Mint has a website for its collector coin customers. In addition, and if you wish to expand, the following website facilities are offered:

(i) Current online facilities

Online ordering
Forum Facility (an open contributory facility relating to coinage)
Corporate information provision (history, annual report etc.)
Museum (information on the current museum collection)
General circulation coinage statistics
Chat facility (opportunity to talk to members of the Royal Mint and other coin enthusiasts)
Monthly competitions
e-mail based inquiry facility (order, product information etc.)
Contact via e-mail

(ii) Expecting to be delivered by 2002

Order tracking facility
Subscription e-mail newsletter

UK Debt Management Office

(i) Current: Website giving information on gilts policy announcements and publications

(ii) By 2002: Gilts database accessible via website

Possibly, personal investor access to the Bank of England's gilts brokerage service; and
Bidding at gilts auctions (but cannot be certain)

National Savings

The National Savings Internet site currently offers product information and access to application forms for all products which can be printed and sent by post to National Savings.

National Savings aims to provide the following services online for all products (with the possible exception of the passbook savings account):

general information and inquiry fulfilment
sales and account opening
after sales service and information
limited withdrawal services

Delivery of these services is expected to be available for customers before 2002.

Office for National Statistics (ONS)

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) currently manages/provides two websites:

The ONS website; which promotes the ONS and its products and services.

It provides sources and contacts for all the products we produce and services we provide; and

the Government Statistical Service (GSS) website which offers free downloadable economic and social statistics via a database delivery system, ONS Press Releases, details of job vacancies and training with the GSS and carries promotions and links to other Government Departments' statistics.

The new National Statistics website, to go live in June, will be a redesigned amalgamation of both the previous sites. It will offer everything both sites already offer. In addition many publications will be available to view online with the option to purchase via e-commerce in place by the end of the year.

Further development and enhancement of the site will be led by research with users.

HM Treasury

The domestic Treasury has contact with the general public through its Publishing Unit, the Public Inquiry Unit and via Ministerial Correspondence, and with business via its procurement procedures. The Publishing Unit is responsible for the Treasury's Internet site, which already offers online access to many of its publications. It is also possible to e-mail the Public Inquiry Unit via a link on the public website. The system that deals with Ministerial Correspondence will be updated to cope with all forms of electronic communication, including e-mail, before 2002. The Treasury Procurement Unit is working closely with the Office of Government Commerce and plans to participate in the Government Shopping Mall and to pilot electronic tendering before 2002.

Inland Revenue

(i) The following services are currently available online:

By Electronic Data Interchange (EDI)

Electronic Lodgement Service (for approved agents to send their clients Self Assessment returns to the Revenue electronically. 300,000 returns for 1998–99 were received this way)

Employer Electronic Communication (for, predominantly large, employers to exchange PAYE and CIS forms and returns with the Revenue electronically)

On the Internet, via our website, are:

provision of departmental information and guidance

a range of forms for download and print,

Valuation Office 1995 and 2000 Non-Domestic Rating Lists online, with an online appeals facility

Capital Taxes Office, Tax-exempt Heritage Assets database

registration facility for the new service which will allow individual taxpayers to send their tax return to Inland Revenue via the Internet within the next few weeks

Additional services planned to be available online by 2002 will allow a range of forms and returns to be sent to the Inland Revenue via the Internet

Self Assessment

Pay As You Earn (PAYE)

A number of other services, such as Corporation Tax, which will be delivered during 2002 are currently at the planning stage

Valuation Office

Targets in respect of key services to be delivered by 2002

Complaints and correspondence. Facility already enabled. The target is for 25 per cent. being received electronically by 2002. The recent implementation of Internet e-mail in all Valuation

Offices and creation of the VOA website should ensure this target is, commensurate with the public's access to e-mail, easily met.

Rating List availability

The 1995 and 2000 rating lists are now available online via the Internet. There have been 2 million "hits" since January 2000

Rating appeals

Since April 2000 ratepayers and their advisers have been able to submit appeals electronically against the 1995 and 2000 rating lists. The target is that by 2002 40 per cent. of appeals are submitted this way. Critical to meeting this target is success in working closely with the surveying profession to ensure the numerous appeals they submit on behalf of clients are electronic.

Forms of Return

Prior to each quinquennial revaluation of non domestic properties up to 1.8 million notices requiring a return of information essential to the valuation process are issued.

The next 2005 revaluation will require forms being issued in early 2003. We expect to offer an electronic lodgement service with a target of 20 per cent. of forms being received this way.

Transfer of Rating and Council Tax Data to Valuation Tribunal Offices.

The VOA transfers large quantities of information in respect of appeals to the VTO's on a regular basis. Previously achieved in hard copy and then magnetic tape this process became electronic in October 1999.

Council Tax Lists and Appeals via the Internet

Government guidelines currently preclude publishing the Council Tax lists on the Internet. Consideration is being given to how to facilitate electronic lodgement of appeals and what the target should be.

Data transfer of lists and schedules to BA's

VOA frequently transfers significant quantities of data to Billing Authorities in the form of complete lists and schedules for Council Tax and Rating. Current media is hard copy, floppy disk or tape (23 million properties). With effect from 1 May 2000 this data transfer is available electronically.

Instructions

With effect from 1 June 2000 the key instructions used by VOA staff to carry out their responsibilities will be available online to the public

Telephone

Last year the Agency implemented a new telephone system which enables the public to ring any valuation office in the country at local call rates

Office of Government Commerce HQ

(i) OGC provides online information through its website

OGC are planning to have the infrastructure to enable departments to carry out online electronic procurement functions by 2002

PACE

Assumes that as the question is about services to the public, in which case a nil return for both *(i)* and *(ii)*

The Buying Agency

TBA currently provide an online catalogue and ordering facility for goods and services available through competitively tendered frameworks for use by buyers throughout the public sector.

The existing online ordering will be extended to include payment etc. before 2002

CCTA

The only service CCTA provides online to the public is the availability of the open.gov.uk access point to government websites. We have no plans for additional services by 2002.

We do provide online services to other Government organisations, *(a)* in terms of advice and guidance provided on the Virtual Foundation intranet site and *(b)* through our catalogue services and framework contracts for Government purchasers of IT goods and services. It is planned to expand these facilities by 2002.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what safeguards the Inland Revenue has in place to ensure that employers' annual packs are delivered before the start of a new tax year. [119339]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue includes in the mailing a number of seed packs addressed to its own staff to ensure the completion of the pack and the Royal Mail delivery times.

Royal Mail has its own quality assurance procedures. In addition, the two mailing contractors have strict quality assurance measures in place and the Inland Revenue sends in some of its own staff to check on the assembly and packing of the Annual Packs.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of employers' annual packs due to be sent out by the Inland Revenue for the new tax year had been dispatched by 4 April; and if he will make a statement on how the dispatch has been organised. [119341]

Dawn Primarolo: We understand there is a small problem in the order of 1 per cent. in the despatch of Employers' Annual Packs by 4 April 2000.

The Inland Revenue's IT partner—EDS—supplied Dataforce Group, Northampton, with name, address and reference details of some 1.2 million employers to whom an Annual Pack was to be issued. Dataforce Group personalised address carriers for each employer and enclosed 50 per cent. of these together with the other contents of Annual Packs, the other 50 per cent. being handled by Scotmail Ltd. of Glasgow. The Annual Packs were despatched by second class post. The Inland Revenue has three year contracts with both Dataforce Group and Scotmail, which have at least a further two years to run. These contracts were let in 1999 through the normal contract letting process, overseen by the Inland Revenue Contractors and Procurement Unit.

The Inland Revenue has outsourced the assembly and despatch of its Annual Packs since 1993.

The management and control of the contracts with Dataforce Group, Scotmail and Royal Mail in respect of employer packs, were handled by Inland Revenue, Business and Management Services Division in Shipley, West Yorkshire.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about the delivery of Inland Revenue employers' annual packs in 2000 to date; and if he will make a statement. [119340]

Dawn Primarolo: Treasury Ministers receive representations on a wide range of subjects.

Tobacco Smuggling

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to limit tobacco smuggling via the port of Dover from the continent. [119581]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government recently announced a huge new investment of up to £209 million for HM Customs and Excise to tackle tobacco smuggling. Customs are appointing nearly 1,000 extra staff, a substantial number of whom will be at Dover. In addition, Dover will be included in the new national network of x-ray scanners.

Finance Bill

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which clauses in the Finance Bill were altered prior to its introduction so that their wording conformed to the aims of the Tax Law Rewrite project in respect of plain language. [119423]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* Draftsmen always seek to write as clearly as possible, subject to the overriding requirements of accuracy and certainty. Where provisions in a Finance Bill amend past Finance Acts—as is often the case—the drafting has to take account of the structure and wording of the existing legislation.

In the case of the Finance Bill 2000, the draftsmen have also been able to take account of the draft legislation published by the Tax Law Rewrite Project and have, where possible, taken the Project's approach into account. Part 9 of Schedule 22 (on Tonnage Tax) is an example of this.

National Insurance Fund

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 609W, what assumptions were made regarding entitlement to inherited SERPS in calculating the estimated balance in the National Insurance Fund at the end of 2001–02. [118935]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* In calculating the estimated balance in the National Insurance Fund at the end of 2001–02 it was assumed that there would be a 100 per cent. entitlement to inherited SERPS if the spouse died in 2000–01 or 2001–02.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by how much the National Insurance Fund balance at the end of each year from 2000–01 to 2010–11 is expected to exceed the minimum level recommended by the Government Actuary. [118936]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to him on 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 608W, detailing estimates for 2000–01 and 2001–02. As I explained then, the figures are based on the difference between forecasts of receipts and expenditure. Small changes in these forecasts could have a substantial impact on the excess. Current projections suggest that existing policy with respect to the National Insurance Fund is consistent with long-term sustainability. However, given the sensitivity of the variables involved, precise long-term forecasts of any actual excess on the Fund reserves would be misleading.

Employment Tax Credit

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what method was used in calculating the cost of an employment tax credit given in paragraph 3.24 of the Treasury paper, "Supporting Work Through an Employment Tax Credit"; how much he estimates will be paid through the adult allowance portion of the working families tax credit in financial year 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [119053]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* Detailed design of the parameters for an employment tax credit for people without children will be decided in due course prior to its introduction from 2003. The costing in paragraph 3.24 is based on an illustrative model which extends the adult credit in the Working Families Tax Credit to single people and couples with someone over the age of 25, working 30 or more hours, and with a higher rate for couples than for singles. It was estimated using household and income data from the Family Expenditure Survey and the Family Resources Survey.

It is not possible to provide a breakdown of expenditure in the Working Families Tax Credit by type of credit. The amount of award payable is reduced for families whose incomes are above the threshold, and this reduction is applied to the total value of all credits taken together.

Tax Returns

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much was spent on issuing incorrect penalties for people who had filled in and sent off their tax returns on time for the 1998–99 tax year. [119737]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is not available.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer from which budget the money was found to cover the cost of wrongly-issued penalties for 1998–99 tax returns. [119736]

Dawn Primarolo: The cost of incorrectly issuing around 5,000 penalty notices in respect of 1998–99 tax returns has been met out of the Inland Revenue's budget.

Smuggling

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when x-ray detectors for the use of customs officers will be introduced to combat smuggling. [119742]

Dawn Primarolo: It is expected the first scanner will be operational in November 2000. Additional scanners will be installed in the following months.

Small Businesses

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to stimulate investment in and expansion of small businesses; and what proposals he has to remove disincentives to the retention of profits for the purpose of reinvestment in small unincorporated businesses. [119779]

Dawn Primarolo: The recent Budget 2000 took further steps to boost investment in and expansion of small business. These measures form part of the Government's drive to raise productivity across the economy by encouraging enterprise development.

The measures to stimulate investment in small businesses included:

cuts in capital gains tax to create the most favourable environment Britain has ever seen for encouraging entrepreneurs and investment in small business;

an extra £100 million for a new £1 billion target "umbrella fund" for small scale venture capital investment across the regions over the next three to five years;

a new corporate venturing tax relief, designed to promote investment by larger companies in smaller enterprises, which can play a vital role in providing finance and other benefits to innovative small firms; and

changes to the Enterprise Investment Scheme and Venture Capital Trusts will make the schemes more attractive to investors and boost the availability of venture capital for small higher risk trading companies.

The measures to encourage expansion of small businesses by reinvesting their own resources include:

reductions of the small company corporation tax rate from 23 to 20 per cent., and introduction this year of a new starting rate of corporation tax of 10 per cent. for the first £10,000 of taxable profits, with the benefit tapering away as profits rise to £50,000;

a new R&D tax credit designed to encourage investment in R&D by small and medium-sized companies;

extending permanent enhanced first year capital allowances (at 40 per cent.) for small and medium-sized firms to encourage investment in plant and machinery;

introducing 100 per cent. capital allowances for small enterprises investing in IT equipment over the next three years.

The Government have no specific proposals to encourage the retention of profits for the purpose of reinvestment in small unincorporated businesses. However, reductions in income tax rates introduced in the 1999 Budget and the changes to capital allowances for small businesses in the Budget 2000 combine to boost the post-tax revenues of small unincorporated businesses, enabling them to invest more in their future growth.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119544]

Mr. Timms: The Chancellor of the Exchequer's Department have not accepted advertising on, nor sponsorship for, their websites. Therefore, the Departments have not received income to retain.

However, if they were to accept advertising or sponsorship they would follow the practice laid down in the Government website standards and the standards that are applied to all other forms of publicity.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 20 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 451W, on the euro, for what reason he did not refer to the "EuroTour" CD Rom; and what is his policy thereon. [119837]

Mr. Timms: The "Euro Tour" CD Rom was not produced by the UK Government nor was it funded by the Commission in the UK.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 20 April 2000

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Mr. Tharcisse Muvunvi and Captain Valentine Strasser have been granted asylum within the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [113142]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I will write to the right hon. Member shortly.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers have been relocated to Morecambe in the last 12 months. [120014]

Mrs. Roche: Local authorities have been responsible for accommodating destitute asylum seekers in the last 12 months. Therefore, we do not know the number of asylum seekers who may have been relocated to Morecambe in the last 12 months.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy regarding the relocation of asylum seekers to seaside resorts through *(a)* voluntary and *(b)* compulsory dispersal schemes; and if he will make a statement. [120017]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office has not dispersed any asylum seekers under the voluntary dispersal arrangements. This is an arrangement between local authorities.

Under the New Asylum Support Service arrangements, brought in on 3 April 2000, all areas of the United Kingdom will be expected to share the responsibilities of destitute asylum seekers. Those asylum seekers who are eligible for support are being dispersed on a fair and rational basis around the country. On this basis, destinations may include seaside resorts. However, it is our clear intention that no local authority should have a disproportionate share of the responsibility.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is his policy on consulting hon. Members on the relocation of asylum seekers to their constituencies; [120016]

(2) what information is provided to hon. Members representing constituencies in the North West of England from the National Asylum Support Service and the North West Regional Consortium about proposals for relocating asylum seekers in their constituencies. [120019]

Mrs. Roche: A letter will shortly be sent to Members of Parliament advising of the likely cluster areas for dispersal during the first three months of the new arrangements.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans the National Asylum Support Service has to use the Grosvenor Hotel in Morecambe to house asylum seekers; [120015]

(2) what visits have been made by his Department's officials to Morecambe to look at potential properties to house asylum seekers. [120018]

Mrs. Roche: The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has no plans to use the Grosvenor Hotel to house asylum seekers. NASS officials have not visited Morecambe to look at potential properties.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what means it is possible for a person with a well-founded fear of persecution in another country legally to enter the United Kingdom *(a)* when holding valid travel documents from the regime which they are fleeing and *(b)* in the absence of such documents. [120052]

Mrs. Roche: All asylum applications, irrespective of the applicant's method of entry, are considered in accordance with the criteria set out in the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. To be recognised as a refugee, a person must be outside his or her country of nationality and have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

As a matter of law, any asylum applicant who gains entry by material deception having presented a valid travel document or who enters without any documents or using false documents is an illegal entrant.

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford will receive a reply to his letter of 24 January to the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), concerning the proposal to house asylum seekers in the Maldon district. [119953]

Mrs. Roche: The information necessary to provide the answer has been subject to protracted inquiries. I apologise for the delay and a reply will be sent to the hon. Member shortly.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the amount *(a)* spent, *(b)* claimed and *(c)* reimbursed to each local authority in the United Kingdom, and in total, in relation to expenditure on asylum support in each six month period since 1 April 1999; how many payments to local authorities are (i) outstanding and (ii) in dispute; and if he will make a statement. [120055]

Mrs. Roche: Tables showing the amount spent, claimed and reimbursed to each local authority in the United Kingdom have been placed in the Library. It is not shown in six month periods; for the first eight months from 1 April 1999 to 5 December 1999, these costs were covered by a special grant report, for the four months

from then until 31 March 2000, the costs were covered by grant paid under the Asylum Support (Interim Provisions) Regulations 1999. These are shown separately. In each case, the amount claimed is the amount that has been paid.

All claims received by the National Asylum Support Service so far have been paid, but all are still subject to audit.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria must be met by those wishing to provide accommodation to the National Asylum Support Service. [120057]

Mrs. Roche: The accommodation provider will have a contract with the National Asylum Support Service. They will ensure that the accommodation is "suitable" in that it will be of an adequate standard; the relevant standard. The relevant standards are the same as those applied by local authorities when re-housing any homeless residents.

Private Security Industry

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to implement his proposals for regulation of the private security industry. [119566]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As we indicated in our White Paper last year, we intend to introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time permits.

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to bring forward proposals for better regulation of private investigators. [119567]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Our White Paper of last year, "The Government's Proposals for Regulation of the Private Security Industry in England and Wales", proposed that a new authority should be established to set and improve standards in the industry and to license those who work in the private security field. The White Paper proposed that licensing should apply to private investigators in due course.

Custody (Vulnerable Adults)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what specialist training and standard protocols are made available to custody officers for handling persons with learning difficulties and other vulnerable adults. [119996]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Codes of Practice under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 require the presence of an appropriate adult whenever a mentally disordered person (including a person with learning difficulties) is being detained or questioned.

National Police Training (NPT) has developed a two-week training course for Custody Officers which is available for delivery by forces. The course, which includes the content of the provisions of the Codes of Practice, is regularly updated and revised. It is, however, essentially for Chief Officers to decide on the training to be undergone by their officers.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) recognise the value and importance of the custody officer training package, and continue to work with NPT in promoting the use of this course by police forces.

Regeneration-related Initiatives

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list the number and value of *(a)* bids and *(b)* grants made in each of the last three financial years for which figures are available, for each (i) area-based and (ii) other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible; [119796]

(2) if he will list for each *(a)* area-based and *(b)* other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible (i) the amount budgeted and (ii) the total expended in each financial year for the planned lifetime of each initiative. [119788]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office is responsible for a number of initiatives which although not directly aimed at regeneration, contribute indirectly to the regeneration of deprived areas. The information requested on the sums already expended and planned budgets for the current and next financial years in respect of these initiatives is given in the table. Expenditure plans beyond March 2002 will be determined by the current spending review.

£ million

Initiative	*Expended so far*	*Planned expenditure* 2000–01	2001–02
Active Community Demonstration Projects	0.5	1.36	1.36
Drug Treatment Testing Orders[1]	1.75	20	40
Youth Justice Pilots[2]	1.3	0.1	n/a
Reducing Burglary[3]	12	4	Up to 42
Targeted Policing[3]	6.7	15.6	Up to 10.7
CCTV[3]	57.2	0.98	90
Locks for pensioners[3]	n/a	4.5	6.5

[1] Funding added to probation grant. Y1 figures is for pilot areas. Y2 figure is for pilot areas to continue until October when the programme will be rolled out nationally subject to ministerial decision.

[2] £22 million annually has been built into local funding settlements from April 2000 onwards to resource national rollout from June 2000 of the new youth justice measures under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. This figure reflects estimates in the November 1997 White Paper and the Financial Memorandum to the Crime and Disorder Bill.

[3] These initiatives are part of the Crime Reduction Programme, which has a three year budget including evaluation, development running and other overhead costs. Figures shown are what has been committed so far. Total available over three years to 2002 is £62 million for Reducing Burglary, £33 million for targeted policing, £153 for CCTV and up to £11 million for locks for pensioners (depending on take up). Figures of £4 million for targeted policing and 6 million for reducing burglary have been earmarked for evaluation.

[4] There is potential for a further £5 million spend on deferred bids.

The information requested on bids for and grants made in each of the last three financial years for each initiative, could not be collected in the time available. I will write to the hon. Member with the information shortly and place a copy of the letter in the Library.

Prohibited Weapons

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prohibited weapons are held by private individuals in England by permission of the Secretary of State. [119870]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Secretary of State's authority to possess prohibited weapons is only granted to those people who can show they have a genuine need to possess them, almost always to allow them to follow their trade or profession. Authorities are conditioned to limit holdings of prohibited firearms to the minimum number required and specify stringent security conditions under which the weapons are to be kept.

The vast majority of authorities are held by companies who either manufacture, sell or transport such weapons or who need them for research, development or testing purposes.

There are only five private individuals in England authorised by the Secretary of State to possess a total of 1,282 prohibited weapons. The vast majority of these are held by one person in one of the most comprehensive private collections of historic firearms in the world. The remaining firearms are held by a forensic firearms expert; a lecturer and technical consultant; the owner of a private museum; and a professional trapper of dangerous animals who is called in by the police to deal with such animals as escaped big cats.

PRIME MINISTER

Royal Prerogative

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the occasions in the last three months when powers under the Royal Prerogative were exercised on advice from him. [118412]

The Prime Minister: As Prime Minister and Minister for the Civil Service, a number of powers under the Royal Prerogative are exercised on my advice. These include a range of public appointments, the conduct of foreign affairs and defence, and the management and regulation of the Civil Service. Records are not kept of the individual occasions on which such powers are exercised.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Office, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119505]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

British Nuclear Fuels

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will make it his policy in answering questions tabled by hon. Members to indicate in each case whether British Nuclear Fuels assisted in the preparation of the reply; [120047]

(2) if he will list each of the *(a)* oral and *(b)* written parliamentary answers he has provided since May 1997 which were based on information provided by British Nuclear Fuels. [120049]

The Prime Minister: Internal advice and the source of such advice is not made public in line with exemption 2 of the "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information".

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Bug

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the President of the Council if she will make a final statement on the impact of the Millennium Bug on Government Departments and Agencies. [120545]

Mrs. Beckett: I am pleased to report that, as I predicted in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) on 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 135–36W, thanks to the hard work carried out in Government Departments and Agencies, the Leap Year date change had a negligible impact on them. Very few incidents were reported, and none of them had any impact on the public. Completed questionnaires will be placed, as usual, in the Libraries of the House and published on the internet, as had been the Government's practice throughout. This degree of openness and transparency has been one of the distinguishing features of the Year 2000 programme.

These will be the last questionnaires. My assessment of the impact of the Bug is that is has been very slight, both for central Government and for all the essential services in the national infrastructure. As I have said before, and repeat now, this success was not a matter of chance. Many people worked long and hard to bring it about. Government and businesses will continue to be vigilant throughout the year; but there is no longer any need for systematic monitoring.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal for Schools

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce the funding available following bids under the most recent phase of the New Deal for Schools; and if he will make a statement. [118336]

Jacqui Smith: Allocations to local education authorities were announced on 11 April 2000.

Pupil Behaviour

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what new measures he will

make available to the city academies to help ensure high standards of behaviour by pupils; and if he will make a statement. [118679]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 11 April 2000]:* The first City Academies to be established under the Education Act 1996 will be operating under funding arrangements agreed with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. They are due to be set up in the autumn of 2001. Detailed arrangements for managing behaviour will be for the schools themselves to determine, but they will have access to my Department's guidance on a range of behaviour issues.

School Sixth Forms

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools in England and Wales with sixth forms and the relevant LEA giving the number of pupils in year *(a)* 12, *(b)* 13 and *(c)* 14+ for each of the past three years and the cost per full-time student in each of these schools. [119690]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not publish information on maintained schools with a sixth form in England at individual school level. Information held at local education authority area is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

The Department is currently collecting information on sixth forms in maintained secondary schools for January 2000 and this data will be published in a statistical volume in September.

For information on sixth forms in Wales, I refer the hon. Member to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

Special Schools

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* maintained and *(b)* independent special schools there were in *(a)* 1970 and *(b)* 1999; how many children attending those schools came from broken homes; and what was the cost of the maintained special schools in both years. [119769]

Jacqui Smith: In 1999 there were 1,148 maintained special schools and 84 independent approved schools. Latest expenditure available for costs in relation to maintained special schools is for 1998–99 and shows a unit cost of £10,350 per pupil. We do not have comparable figures for 1970 and we do not collect information on the domestic arrangements for children who attend these schools.

Exclusions

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools were excluded in (i) 1970, (ii) 1980 and (iii) 1999; and if he will estimate how many of those came from broken homes. [119768]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of permanent exclusions from maintained schools (except special schools) submitting returns under the voluntary national exclusions reporting system which covered the period from April 1990 to April 1992 was 2,910 in year one and 3,833 in year two.

Figures on permanent exclusions were first collected by my Department in January 1996 in respect of the academic year 1994–95 and have since been collected annually. Data on permanently excluded pupils' family background have not been collected. The figures currently available are shown in the following table.

Information on permanent exclusions for the academic year 1994–95, and academic years 1995–96 to 1997–98, were also published in two separate statistical releases, entitled "Permanent Exclusions from schools in England" on the 30 September 1998 and 16 June 1999, respectively. Both releases are available in the Library.

Provisional figures for permanent exclusions from schools in England for the academic year 1998–99 will be published in a statistical first release in May.

Maintained primary and secondary schools: Number of permanent exclusions in each academic year

	Primary	*Secondary*
1994–95[1]	1,365	9,197
1995–96	1,068	10,344
1996–97	1,575	10,463
1997–98	1,539	10,187

[1] The number of permanent exclusions was estimated to take account of a small number of schools that did not provide any information on their permanent exclusions

Statemented Children

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children were statemented in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980 and *(c)* 1999; and how many came from broken homes. [119767]

Jacqui Smith: There are no figures available for 1970 and 1980; statements of special educational needs were only introduced after the implementation of the 1981 Education Act, in 1983. In 1999, 255,584 children had statements. We do not collect information on the domestic arrangements of children who have statements.

Standard Spending Assessments

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the education standard spending assessments per pupil for *(a)* England, *(b)* Devon, *(c)* Torbay and *(d)* Plymouth for the current financial year. [119855]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the education standard spending assessment (SSA) per pupil and the DfEE special and specific grant allocations per pupils for the areas requested for 2000–01. The special and specific grant totals includes the money for schools announced in the Budget on 21 March.

£

	SSA per pupil	*Special/specific grants per pupil*
England	2,782	145
Devon	2,649	160
Torbay	2,712	141
Plymouth	2,695	145

Performance and Assessment

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish the mechanism used to calculate a school's improvement since its last inspection as reported in the Performance and Assessment report using a 7-point scale. [119920]

Ms Estelle Morris: PANDA (Performance and Assessment) reports are a matter for Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead. I have asked him therefore to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his Department's policy is on *(a)* advertising and *(b)* acknowledging company sponsorship on the websites of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies; which companies (i) have placed advertisements and (ii) are acknowledged as sponsors on those websites; how much revenue has been received for each financial year since 1997 from such advertisements and sponsorship; and if that revenue has been retained within the budget of his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [119547]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 19 April 2000]:* My Department follows the guidance on advertising given in the "Framework policy and guidelines for the use, management and design of public sector websites" published by the Cabinet Office, which recommend that:

> Government sites are permitted to carry advertising. In designing pages, Departments and agencies should ensure that advertisers' branding does not detract from the effectiveness and appearance of their own branding or that of the Government as a whole. Particular attention should be given to avoid any implication of endorsement of products or services or of contradiction between Government messages and those of advertisers.

My Department does not currently carry advertising or receive sponsorship for its websites and as a consequence no revenue has been received or retained within the budget of the Department. That is also the position, to the best of my knowledge, in relation to the websites of my Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies.

Local Information Availability

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department is taking to improve the availability of local labour market, learning and skills information. [120484]

Ms Jowell: I am pleased to announce that we are funding an increase in the sample size of the Labour Force Survey in England of approximately 40,000 households per year to improve the availability of local labour market, learning and skills data in partnership with the Office for National Statistics. This was recommended in the second report of the Skills Taskforce and, in addition, will aid in the monitoring of adult learning targets and the monitoring of equal opportunities issues at the local level.

Teacher Training Agency

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish the recently completed Financial Management Survey of the Teacher Training Agency. [120483]

Ms Estelle Morris: In accordance with the Government's policy of conducting quinquennial reviews of all non-departmental public bodies, my Department has undertaken a review of the Teacher Training Agency. I am today publishing the results of stage two of the quinquennial review, which comprised a financial management survey of the agency.

The survey report states that the agency has good levels of financial control and has in place effective organisation, finance and management structures and systems. The report's recommendations will help the agency to address the areas for relatively minor improvement which have been identified, and make best use of resources in taking forward its corporate objectives.

Copies of the financial management survey report are being placed in the Library of both Houses.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a substantive response to his letter of 16 February on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Holmes. [120020]

Mr. Wills: A reply was issued on Wednesday 19 April 2000.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many former grant maintained schools have *(a)* used and *(b)* exhausted their reserves since 1998. [120259]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on the public balances held by former GM schools at the beginning and end of the 1999–2000 financial year will not be published by LEAs until 30 September 2000. Information on their private balances is not collected by local authorities or central government.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many former grant-maintained schools have sought financial contributions from the parents; and how much has thereby been raised since 1998. [120260]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on this is not collected by central or local government.

School Meals

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to make regulations and issue guidelines about minimum nutritional standards in school meals; and if he will make a statement. [119465]

Jacqui Smith: We intend to lay regulations setting minimum nutritional standards for school lunches before the summer recess, and to make available guidance to school caterers this autumn. The regulations will come

into effect in all maintained schools in April 2001. The standards have been developed in a practical non-prescriptive manner to ensure pupils receive good quality meals. Headteachers are now free to choose different suppliers for meals as a result of the Government's fair funding arrangements and these standards will help to ensure they are of consistent quality.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which foodstuffs listed in the guidelines for minimum nutritional standards in schools contain iron, zinc, selenium and protein. [119502]

Jacqui Smith: We intend that the regulations setting minimum nutritional standards for school lunches will set food—rather than nutrient—based standards. We shall aim for workable standards which will not contain compulsory food items. Schools and local education authorities will be required to offer options from the four main food groups.

Supplementary guidance for caterers will offer advice and list those food items which best provide the nutrients which are particularly important in a young person's diet, such as iron.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he plans to put in place to monitor the operation of, and enforce the guidelines for, minimum nutritional standards in schools. [119501]

Jacqui Smith: Schools and local education authorities will be under a duty to comply with the regulations which will set out the new nutritional standards for school lunches. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will investigate any complaints that the standards are not being met and will if necessary issue a direction to ensure compliance with the statutory duties. Guidance on the regulations will include advice on monitoring of nutritional standards. Finally, the Department will be evaluating the impact of the nutritional standards over time.

SOCIAL SECURITY

MIRAS

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the impact of the abolition of MIRAS on unemployed people with endowment mortgages; [119966]

(2) what plans he has to increase income support, or other state assistance, following the abolition of MIRAS, for unemployed people who are paying increased mortgage repayments as a result of mis-selling of endowment mortgages. [119965]

Mr. Bayley: There should not be any effect due to the loss of MIRAS. Benefit was recalculated from 6 April automatically, and customers received a notification from the Benefits Agency, informing them of the change to their benefit. An endowment mortgage does not affect the recalculation of benefit. The mortgage scheme only makes payments on the interest element of the mortgage.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the report on the Contributions Agency by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate was published; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [119821]

Mr. Rooker: The BFI report on the then Contributions Agency was published in July 1999. A copy was placed in the Library and can also be found on the Department's internet site at www.dss.gov.uk/

State Pension

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of increasing the basic state pension in line with average earnings over the next five years in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK. [119868]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimate for Great Britain and Scotland

£ million

	Great Britain		*Scotland*
Year	*Gross cost*	*Net cost*	*Gross cost*
2000–01	350	250	50
2001–02	900	700	100
2002–03	1,650	1,250	150
2003–04	2,450	1,900	250
2004–05	3,300	2,600	300

Notes:

1. Costs are rounded to the nearest £50 million and are in 200 -01 benefit rates.

2. Costs include benefits whose rates are linked by statute to the rate of basic Retirement Pension.

3. Gross costs are estimated by the Government Actuary's Department. Costs net of means-tested benefit savings have been estimated using the Policy Simulation Model and PENSIM.

4. Net costs are not available for Scotland.

5. UK figures are not available.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average length of time that *(a)* male pensioners, *(b)* female pensioners and *(c)* all pensioners have drawn the basic state retirement pension at five yearly intervals since 1970. [120053]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

The mean and median length of time in years since reaching pensionable age for the population of pensionable age

	Men aged 65+		*Women aged 60+*		*Men and women aged 65+/60+*	
	Mean	*Median*	*Mean*	*Median*	*Mean*	*Median*
1970	7.6	6.1	10.9	9.5	9.9	8.3
1975	7.6	6.2	11.3	10.0	10.1	8.6
1980	7.8	6.7	11.8	10.8	10.5	9.2
1985	8.4	7.4	12.2	11.3	11.0	9.8
1990	8.6	7.3	12.8	11.4	11.4	10.0

The mean and median length of time in years since reaching pensionable age for the population of pensionable age

	Men aged 65+		Women aged 60+		Men and women aged 65+/60+	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
1995	9.0	7.8	13.3	12.3	11.8	10.3
1998	9.2	8.1	13.4	12.4	11.9	10.6

Notes:

1. Estimates are supplied by the Government Actuary's Department and are based on population estimates supplied by the Office for National Statistics.

2. Figures relate to Great Britain.

3. Estimates are likely to overestimate average durations of State Retirement Pension claims, due to those who claim their pension after State pension age.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the annual cost in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK of raising the basic state pension to the level of the minimum income guarantee for (i) all pensioners, (ii) pensioners aged over 70 years and (iii) pensioners aged over 80 years. [119867]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimates for Great Britain and Scotland of the cost of raising the basic state pension to the level of the MIG in the year 2001–02

£ million

	All pensioners	Pensioners over 70	Pensioners over 80
Great Britain			
Gross cost	5650	3750	1450
Net cost	4500	2850	950
Scotland			
Gross cost	500	300	100

Notes:

1. Costs are rounded to the nearest to the £50 million and are 2000/1 benefit rates.

2. Costs do not include benefits whose rates are linked to the rate of basic Retirement Pension as the question asked for the pensioner costs only.

3. Gross costs are estimated by the Government Actuary's Department. Costs net of means-tested benefit savings have been estimated using the Policy Simulation Model.

4. Net costs are not available for Scotland.

5. UK figures are not available.

Reviews, Task Forces and Advisory Groups

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what *(a)* Reviews, *(b)* Task Forces and *(c)* Advisory Groups have been established by his Department since 22 February 1999; what is their membership; and what reports have (i) been published and (ii) are due to be published by (1) them and (2) other such bodies established before 22 February 1999. [119949]

Mr. Rooker: A table containing the information requested on Task Forces, Reviews and Advisory Groups has been placed in the Library.

Full lists detailing Government Task Forces and Review Groups will be published every six months. The next list covering the period to the end of April will be published in due course.

Benefits Agency

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what performance targets he has set the Benefits Agency for 2000–01; and if he will make a statement. [120588]

Angela Eagle: The targets we have set BA for 2000–01 are as follows.

They reflect our determination to reform the welfare state and to modernise the Social Security system to encourage work for those who can and provide security for those who cannot.

They underpin the Departmental Aim and Objectives set out in our Public Service Agreement.

Further information on BA plans for 2000–01 is contained in their business plan, which will be published on 5 May. Copies will be placed in the Library.

Targets for 2000–01 are:

Benefits Agency Secretary of State Targets 2000–01

Active Customer Focused Service Delivery

1. By March 2001 extend the scope of electronic service offered to the public, namely by providing a wider range of services available via the internet.

2. Seek to improve key customer services, set out in Benefits Agency Customer Charter, namely by providing:

   easy access to accurate benefit information;

   accurate and timely payments; and

   effective complaints handling.

3. Implement an action plan to establish a Performance Management Unit to reduce variations in performance within the Agency specifically, by March 2001:

   Improving the performance of the lowest performing offices;

   Improving the management information to underpin performance improvements.

4. Continue to work with the Employment Service, Local Authorities and private and voluntary sectors in 12 locations to pilot ONE.

5. From May 2000, introduce a take-up campaign, contacting at least two million pensioners and encouraging them to claim the pensioner Minimum Income Guarantee in order to make inroads into pensioner poverty.

6. By October 2000, deliver a national Retirement Pensions telephone claims service.

7. From November 2000, deliver improvements in computer produced notifications to Income Support customers.

8. By March 2001, work with others in the Department to develop, pilot and evaluate broad based measures of consumer focus and satisfaction, so we can introduce new arrangements during 2001.

Secure and Accurate Services

9. Reduce by 30 per cent. losses from fraud and errors in Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance by March 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002.

10. By March 2001, work with others in the Department to prepare the way for extending ACT as the normal method of payment in a programme starting from 2003 and concluding in 2005, so that

    a programme of customer research can be conducted;

    payment processes can be improved to better support Automated Credit Transfers.

Investing in our People

11. By December 2000, contribute to the reduction in public sector sickness by reducing absences by 10 per cent. from 1998 Public Service Agreement baseline levels.

12. By 31 March 2001, work with others in the Department to develop, pilot and evaluate new ways of measuring staff perception of the organisation to improve satisfaction and motivation.

Effective Management of Money

13. To recover £135 million in cases where benefit has been overpaid, contributing to the Department's overall target of £175 million.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the effect on housing benefit expenditure will be if social rents in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK were reduced by (i) 5 per cent. (ii) 10 per cent. and (iii) 15 per cent. [119978]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Estimated savings in Housing Benefit expenditure[1] for percentagereductions in social rents[2] at 2000–01 prices[3]

£ million

	5 per cent.	10 per cent.	15 per cent.
Scotland	40	90	130
Great Britain	420	830	1,240

[1] Estimates relate to gross Housing Benefit expenditure (the amounts actually paid to claimants) in respect of the current financial year 2000–01

[2] 'Social' rents are taken to refer to Local Authority and Registered Social Landlords

[3] Estimated results are based on a combination of information from the Family Resources Survey 1997–98, uprated to 2000–01 prices and benefit levels, along with the forecasts underlying the Departmental Report 2000.

Notes:

1. The information relates to Scotland and Great Britain. The Department forecasts only apply to Great Britain, therefore it has not been possible to supply corresponding data for the UK.
2. Figures are rounded to £10 million

Pensioners

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have been entitled to means-tested benefits in each of the past five years; how many are expected to be entitled to be means-tested benefits in each of the following five years; and what proportion those represent of total pensioners in each year. [119944]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the following tables.

Total of number of pensioner benefit units receiving and number entitled but not receiving means tested benefits in 1996–97

	Number in millions	As percentage of all pensioner benefit units
Income Support	2.0 to 2.3	26 to 29
Housing Benefit	1.9 to 2.1	24 to 27
Council Tax Benefit	3.4 to 3.9	43 to 50

Total of number of pensioner benefit units receiving and number entitled but not receiving means tested benefits in 1997–98

	Number in millions	As percentage of all pensioner benefit units
Income Support	2.0 to 2.3	25 to 29
Housing Benefit	1.8 to 2.1	23 to 26
Council Tax Benefit	3.2 to 3.8	41 to 48

Notes:

1. Estimates refer to pensioners in private households, in Great Britain
2. Self-employed pensioners are excluded from counts of benefit recipients and entitled non-recipients
3. Pensioner benefit units here include couples where either member is over 60
4. Estimates are presented as ranges because estimates of entitled non-recipients are in ranges.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the annual cost of *(a)* removing the means test for benefits for pensioners and *(b)* keeping SERPS in (i) Scotland and (ii) the UK. [119869]

Mr. Rooker: The cost of removing the means test for benefits for pensioners depends on what assumptions are made. The net cost of uprating the basic State Pension to the level of the Minimum Income Guarantee is around £4.5 billion, excluding the effect on linked benefits. Retaining SERPS in preference to the State Second Pension would result in a cost saving because the State Second Pension will be more generous to some 18 million low and moderate earners, carers and long-term disabled people with broken work records. Estimates apply to Great Britain. Separate costs for Scotland are not available.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the proposed pensioners tax credit; and when it will come into force. [119971]

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in his Budget Statement, proposed that the pensioner credit should be introduced in the next Parliament.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) of 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 401–02W, on pensions, if he will estimate his Department's expenditure on pensioners as a proportion of GDP in each year from 1979–80 to 1990–91. [120239]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Expenditure on people over 60 as a percentage of all social security benefit expenditure and as a percentage of GDP

		Expenditure as a percentage of:	
Year	Expenditure (cash £ million)	All expenditure	GDP
1979–80	10,138	53.99	4.91
1989–81	12,134	53.55	5.15
1981–82	14,357	51.83	5.56
1982–83	16,105	50.92	5.70
1983–84	17,456	49.41	5.70
1984–85	18,496	48.39	5.61
1985–86	20,172	48.38	5.58
1986–87	21,697	48.31	5.58
1987–88	22,866	48.97	5.32
1988–89	23,652	49.97	4.94

Expenditure on people over 60 as a percentage of all social security benefit expenditure and as a percentage of GDP

Year	Expenditure (cash £ million)	Expenditure as a percentage of: All expenditure	GDP
1989–90	25,715	51.25	4.92
1990–91	28,490	50.42	5.06

Notes:
1. Expenditure figures are consistent with Table 3 of the 2000 Departmental Report (Cm 4614) and earlier equivalents.
2. Social Security benefit expenditure includes non-Departmental funded expenditure on Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit and earlier equivalents.

Combined Pension Statement

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a copy of the combined pension statement launched on 12 April, referred to in departmental press release 00/114. [119945]

Mr. Rooker: I have placed in the Library an example of the combined pension statement issued by the Prudential, which includes details of both state and private pension rights.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much it has cost to administer the winter fuel payments in each year since their introduction; and what the projected costs are for the forthcoming year. [119938]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Cost to administer the winter fuel payments since their introduction

£ million

Year	Cost
1997–98	13.7
1998–99	13.1
1999–2000	14.3

Notes:
1. Administration costs for 2000–01 are not yet finalised.
2. A provisional estimate of £10.2 million was anticipated; however, this does not include publicity costs or the extra costs resulting from the ECJ ruling.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the additional cost to his Department's wage bill would be *(a)* in Scotland and *(b)* the UK if the minimum wage for all age groups was raised to (i) £4, (ii) £4.20 and (iii) £4.50 per hour. [119980]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

The additional pay bill cost for the Department of Social Security of rises in the minimum wage

£

Rate of minimum wage	Additional costs: All DSS staff (including Scotland)	DSS staff based in Scotland
4.00	2,634,176	308,366
4.20	7,398,281	869,668
4.50	15,260,259	1,803,400

Data Matching

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if his Department has completed checking the individual payroll items against the departmental central index; and if he will make a statement. [119860]

Mr. Rooker: This Department does not at present match its payroll data against the departmental central index (DCI). To do so would involve a change of conditions of service of its staff and would have implications in respect of data protection legislation.

However, the large employers unit of the Contributions Agency, now part of the Inland Revenue, does carry out a reconciliation of National Insurance contributions paid by employees of companies against its records. In common with other large employers, this Department has been examined by this unit.

There is no evidence of widespread benefit fraud by staff: the last payroll cleansing exercise conducted by the Contributions Agency of the Department's payroll identified only one member of staff claiming benefit using their own national insurance number.

Company Pension Schemes

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pension schemes of companies that have *(a)* gone into liquidation and *(b)* otherwise ceased to exist are awaiting regulatory approval for their winding-up. [119950]

Mr. Rooker: There is no system of regulatory approval for pension schemes that wind-up. The Inland Revenue gives approval in respect of arrangements made by the trustees to secure the pension rights when a scheme ceases to be contracted-out of the State Earnings Related Pension Schemes (SERPS). There are about 24,000 schemes in the process of ceasing to contract out. Many of them will also be winding-up. No information is available about schemes winding up because the sponsoring employer is insolvent.

Government Pensions Liability

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 21 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 477–78W, on Government pensions liability, what is the Government's liability in each case in each of the years referred to as a percentage of estimated gross domestic product assuming that gross domestic product increases in real terms at *(a)* 1.5 per cent. per annum and *(b)* 2 per cent. per annum. [120066]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

With real GDP growth of 1.5 per cent. per year pension expenditure is estimated to increase as a proportion of GDP between 2000–01 and 2030–31, from 4.3 per cent. to 4.7 per cent. After 2030–31 the proportion of GDP represented by pension expenditure falls, from 4.7 per cent. to 3.8 per cent. by 2050–51.

With real GDP growth at 2.0 per cent. per year pension expenditure as a proportion of GDP follows a more general pattern of decline, from 4.3 per cent. in 2000/01 to 3.0 per cent. in 2050–51. This more general pattern of decline is wholly attributable to the faster increase in GDP.

Government's pensions liability as a proportion of GDP assuming real growth of 1.5 per cent. per annum, 2.0 per cent. per annum in GDP

Percentage

Year	*Real GDP growth of 1.5 per cent.*	*Real GDP growth of 2.0 per cent.*
2000–01	4.3	4.3
2005–06	4.3	4.2
2010–11	4.5	4.2
2015–16	4.5	4.1
2020–21	4.4	3.9
2030–31	4.7	4.0
2040–41	4.4	3.6
2050–51	3.8	3.0

Notes:

1. The figures have been calculated using the following assumptions:
Total pension expenditure is the sum of expenditure on SERPS, State Second Pension, and the Basic State Pension.
SERPS expenditure is based on the assumption that State Second Pension is introduced in 2002 and so any SERPS expenditure after that date is on earlier accruals.
SERPS expenditure does not include the effects of the Inherited SERPS scheme and accompanying deferral announced on 15 March 2000.
State Second Pension expenditure assumes the scheme becomes flat rate from 2006 onwards, when Stakeholder pensions are established. From 2006 everyone aged under 40, and earning over £9,500 (in 1999 earnings terms) chooses to contract out of State Second Pensions. Contracting out is based on the proposals contained in the current Bill.
Increases in contracted out rebates as a result of introducing State Second Pension and Stakeholder pensions are not included in expenditure figures.
2. Expenditure figures are consistent with those in the Government Actuary Department's report on the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill 1999.
3. GDP for future years is estimated by taking the figure for 1999–2000 and uprating it. GDP figures are often subject to revision in later years, and because of the long time horizon over which projection is undertaken the effects of any error corrected in a subsequent revision will be magnified.

Source:
Pension costs from GAD, base GDP figure from ONS.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119515]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Lawyers

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many lawyers are employed by his Department; and how many were employed in 1995. [117813]

Ms Beverley Hughes: On 31 March 2000, 82 lawyers were employed by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, including its Agencies.

It is not possible to make strict comparisons with the situation that existed prior to the formation of the Department in 1997. The organisational changes that accompanied the merger of the former Department of Environment and the Department of Transport included new responsibilities for the regions. However, on 31 March 1995 the former Department of the Environment employed 39 lawyers and the former Department of Transport obtained its legal services from the Treasury Solicitors Department, who allocated 29 lawyers for the purpose.

The increase in legal activity over the last five years is due to a variety of factors, including additional work on legislation, human rights and devolution.

Legal Alcohol Limit

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 430W, on alcohol limits for drivers in EU member states, what were *(a)* the nature and conclusions of the Council of Ministers' discussions on 28 March, concerning the Commission Communications, and *(b)* the Treaty Article on which any such harmonisation proposal would be based. [118840]

Mr. Hill: At the Transport Council meeting of 28 March 2000, the European Commission presented its recently adopted Communication on road safety. The United Kingdom strongly welcomed the Communication and other member states also responded positively. The Commission indicated that blood alcohol levels would be the subject of a Recommendation. However, the Commission pointed out that the proposal for a Directive which was first presented in 1988 remains on the table if the Council wishes to debate it. It was concluded that there should be a discussion of the Communication at the Council meeting in June.

Any harmonisation proposal would be based on Article 75 of the Treaty of Rome which, as amended by the Maastricht Treaty, covers the competence of the Union to act in the field of road safety.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will name the board member for each regional development agency with responsibility for environmental issues. [118955]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Members are appointed by the Secretary of State on the basis of their experience and capacity and are not allocated responsibility for particular issues. However, some RDAs, as noted, have given responsibility for environmental matters to one or more of their members.

Agency	*Members*
East of England Development Agency	Richard Powell
Yorkshire Forward	Pamela Warhurst
North West Development Agency	Kath Reade
South East of England Development Agency	Kit Oliver
East Midlands Development Agency	Graham Chapman Gill Gardiner Bob Middleton

Agency	*Members*
Advantage West Midlands	Responsibility shared across all board members
South West of England Regional	Responsibility shared across all board members
One North East	Currently under consideration

Japan (Visit)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the *(a)* itinerary, *(b)* purpose and *(c)* cost of his visit to Japan. [119532]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* I represented the United Kingdom at the meeting of G8 Environment Ministers from Friday 7 to Sunday 9 April in Otsu, Japan. I then travelled to Tokyo where on 10 April I had meetings with Prime Minister Mori, Foreign Minister Kono and the honorary Chairman of Toyota. I also visited the Tokyo traffic control centre and met UK and Japanese businessmen. I returned to the UK on Tuesday 11 April. All travel was in accordance with the Ministerial Code and my costs for the trip were approximately £7,500.

Parking Charges

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his Department's policy is on use by local authorities of the revenue generated from charges for on-street car parking to pay for heritage projects and tourist facilities; and if he will make a statement. [119998]

Mr. Hill: The use by local authorities of on-street parking revenue surpluses is governed by section 55 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. Briefly, this provides that local authorities may use surpluses for the provision and maintenance of off-street parking facilities but if it appears to the local authority that the provision of further off-street parking provision in their area is unnecessary or undesirable, surpluses may be used for the purpose of meeting the costs of public transport services and highway or road improvement projects. Local authorities may not therefore spend revenue from on-street car parking to pay for heritage projects and tourist facilities.

Croydon Tramlink

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the passenger projections for Croydon Tramlink. [119839]

Mr. Hill: This is a commercial matter for Tramtrack Croydon Ltd., the private sector consortium which holds the concession to build, operate and maintain Croydon Tramlink.

Parliamentary Answers (BNFL)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list each of the *(a)* oral and *(b)* written parliamentary answers Ministers in his Department have provided since May 1997 which were based on *(a)* information and *(b)* a draft provided by British Nuclear Fuels. [120044]

Mr. Mullin: Internal advice and the source of such advice is not made public in line with exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Best Value Inspection Regime

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those private sector companies involved in the best value inspection regime. [119990]

Ms Armstrong: No private sector companies are yet involved in carrying out best value inspections. However, both the Audit Commission and some of the other Inspectorates intend to use teams which include staff with private sector experience, either on secondment or as consultants. The Audit Commission are also in discussion with a number of potential private sector providers with a view to their use on future occasions.

Departmental Initiatives

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the number and value of *(a)* bids for and *(b)* grants made in each of the last three financial years for which figures are available, for each (i) area-based and (ii) other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible. [119798]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested is not held centrally and could not be collected in the time available. I will write shortly with the information to the hon. Member.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each *(a)* area-based and *(b)* other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible (i) the amount budgeted and (ii) the total expended in each financial year for the planned lifetime of each initiative. [119793]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Expenditure since 1997 and the amounts budgeted for this financial year and for 2001–02, for the area-based and other regeneration-related initiatives for which my Department is responsible are set out as follows. The level of funding for each of these initiatives beyond March 2002 is being considered in the current spending review. Information on planned budgets and the total expenditure in previous years for other regeneration programmes may be found in the departmental Annual Report.

£ million

(i) Amount budgeted	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Area-based initiatives		
Single Regeneration Budget	813.8	878.5
New Deal for Communities	120.7	450.0
Other regeneration-related initiatives		
European Regional Development Fund	286.2	231.2
Coalfields Regeneration Trust	20.6	18.2

£ million

(ii) Total expenditure	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000[1]
Area-based initiatives			
Single Regeneration Budget	458.8	560.9	679.1
New Deal for Communities	—	0.2	48.5
Other regeneration-related initiatives			
European Regional Development Fund	191.5	229.4	336.2
Coalfields Regeneration Trust	—	—	1.0

[1] Provisional outturn

Severance Payments

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy relating to monitoring severance payments made to council officials. [119859]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Local Government (Discretionary Payments)(Amendment) Regulations 1999 introduced provisions which require local authorities in England and Wales to formulate and publish a written statement of their policy in connection with the exercise of their discretion to pay compensation, including severance payments, under parts II, III and IV of the Local Government (Discretionary Payments) Regulations 1996.

The 1999 regulations require each employing authority to be satisfied that their policy is workable, affordable and reasonable having regard to the foreseeable costs. In that way, elected members have direct responsibility for the decisions taken within the terms of their published policy statement and are locally and legally accountable for them to local council taxpayers and to the District Auditor.

My Department does not monitor individual severance payments made by local authorities, nor would it be appropriate to intervene in the way such authorities exercise these statutory functions. We do, however, remain in close touch with the Audit Commission, the Employers' Organisation and other interested parties on the continuing effectiveness of these regulations.

High Hedges

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many submissions he received in response to the consultation paper on high hedges; and if he will make a statement. [119861]

Mr. Mullin: We have received some 3,000 responses to this consultation, which we are currently analysing. We hope to make a statement, setting out our decisions on the way forward on this issue, and the reasons for them, by the summer.

Rough Sleeping

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the Government have done to implement the findings of reports of the Social Exclusion Unit on rough sleeping. [119976]

Ms Armstrong: Following the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit report, the Rough Sleepers Unit was established in April 1999 to deliver the Prime Minister's target of reducing rough sleeping by two-thirds by 2002. On 15 December 1999 the Government published their strategy on rough sleeping, "Coming in from the Cold", which set out in detail how we intend to meet the target. The Rough Sleepers Unit is working across Whitehall and beyond to implement the strategy and reduce rough sleeping.

Water Abstraction

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what scope he plans for the use of economic instruments in relation to water abstraction. [120589]

Mr. Meacher: Within the next two weeks, my Department will publish "Economic Instruments in Relation to Water Abstraction: a consultation paper". Copies will be placed in the Library of the House on the day of publication. The paper will say that the Government take the view that economic instruments may be applied to water abstraction in the following way:

(a) abstraction charges should remain limited to recovery of the Environment Agency's water resources management costs, but should be increased to the extent necessary to meet licence curtailment compensation costs when, but not before, these are incurred, thereby providing incentive for low-value users of water to reduce their licences voluntarily;

(b) trading in licences should be encouraged in such a way that it delivers environmental benefits together with economic gains, within the regulatory requirements of the abstraction licensing system as it will be following the changes which the Government announced on 31 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 756–57, and which it will bring forward in a forthcoming Water Bill;

(c) the Environment Agency should actively encourage abstraction licence trading with a general presumption that trading may be possible in most areas, and in particular by:

ensuring that its licensing administrative processes operate speedily and efficiently, making full use of e-mail and other electronic means;

clearly identifying, within its Abstraction Management Strategies, the scope for trading and any unavoidable limitations to particular types of trades;

establishing an Internet site on which prospective buyers and sellers can record their interest in trading; and by

requiring trading prices and other details of completed trades to be placed on the same Internet site.

The Government will consider this view further in the light of responses to the consultation paper and will announce their firm intentions in due course.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Correspondence

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale will receive a reply to her letter to him dated 3 January regarding farming issues in Morecambe and Lunesdale. [119741]

Ms Quin: I replied to the letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale on 19 April 2000.

WALES

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the percentage change compared to 1990–91 in his Department's energy efficiency in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [118996]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) on 22 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 580–84W, which reported progress for all central government Departments to 31 March 1998.

Figures for the Wales Office are currently included within the data for the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his Department's energy efficiency performance target, expressed as a percentage change in comparison to 1990–91, for each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [118997]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 548–49W.

Birth Certificates

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales for what purposes his Department requires a birth certificate to be furnished by *(a)* employees, *(b)* contractors, *(c)* those applying for employment and contracts and *(d)* other persons. [120310]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department requires those applying for employment to provide either a birth certificate, passport, or driving licence in order to prove identity. Contractors, potential contractors, and other persons are not required to provide their birth certificates.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Pest Control

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee how many reports of *(a)* mice and *(b)* other vermin in the Palace of Westminster he has received in each of the last five years. [119557]

Sir Sydney Chapman: Reports of mice and other vermin in the last five years have been as follows:

Year	*Mice*	*Other vermin*
1995	113	32
1996	187	34
1997	135	20
1998	53	30
1999	102	29

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what action is being taken to reduce the numbers of *(a)* mice and *(b)* other vermin within the Palace of Westminster. [119556]

Sir Sydney Chapman: A specialist pest control contractor is employed regularly to set and check bait boxes in all areas, particularly in Refreshment Department areas and other places where mice are seen. Further specialist advice is obtained from the MAFF expert. Apart from mice, the only other vermin generally found in the Palace of Westminster are insects; these are treated with insecticides appropriate to the type of pest and situation.

CABINET OFFICE

Public Appointments

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what contracts are let with KPMG relating to public appointments. [118295]

Marjorie Mowlam: The information is not held centrally. However, in respect of public bodies sponsored by the Cabinet Office, no contracts are held with KPMG relating to public appointments.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on her policy in respect of the use her Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119513]

Marjorie Mowlam: I refer to the answer my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

Drug Action Teams

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what financial and logistical support the Cabinet Office has provided for Drug Action Teams. [119960]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Drug Action Teams (DATs) are a partnership of local agencies such as health and local authorities, police, probation and local eduction authorities. Funding for their activities is channelled for the most part through these agencies. However, they receive a grant from the Home Office Drug Prevention Advisory Service (DPAS) to fund the running costs for DATs, namely the post of the co-ordinator and administration costs. That grant is set to rise from some £5 million to some £6.7 million over this year to fund the creation of additional DATs, bringing the total up to some 150.

DATs are supported by DPAS in partnership with the UK Anti Drugs Co-ordinator and Cabinet Office UK Anti Drugs Co-ordination Unit (UKADCU). DPAS provides the link between central government and local delivery and has nine regional offices providing advice and support to the DATs in their area in driving forward the Co-ordinator's Strategy. The Co-ordinator and staff of UKADCU also visit DATs and, in partnership with DPAS, organise conferences for DATs to discuss current and future issues.

National Farmers Union

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what meetings she has had with the National Farmers Union as part of her duties as Chair of the Ministerial Group on Rural Affairs. [119937]

Marjorie Mowlam: None. I am currently arranging a mutually convenient date for a meeting with the President of the NFU, Ben Gill.

Special Advisers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what public speaking engagements have been undertaken by special advisers within her Department in each of the last three years. [119968]

Marjorie Mowlam: The UK Anti-Drugs Coordinator and his Deputy have undertaken a large number of public speaking engagements in support of the Government's strategy to combat illegal drugs.

Other special advisers within the Cabinet Office have not undertaken any official public speaking engagements over the last three years.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the foreign visits taken by Ministers on which they were accompanied by a special adviser since May 1997. [119933]

Marjorie Mowlam: Information in the form requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. A list of Cabinet Ministers' visits overseas, and information on spend by all Ministers on travel overseas for the period 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000 is currently being assembled, and will be published as soon as possible. The overall figure on spend on Ministers' travel overseas will include the cost of travel of any Special Advisers accompanying Ministers.

Drugs (Prisons)

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what targets are to be set for reducing the use of drugs in prisons; and what specific measures relate to those targets. [119930]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My Department has agreed the following targets with the Prison Service:

By March 2000

Have established CARATs, (Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare) the basic treatment framework to improve the assessment, advice throughcare and support of prisoners; and put in place more and better quality treatment programmes.

Put in place more dogs trained to detect drugs; more CCTV in visits areas; obtain better information about supply routes and availability of drugs to prisoners; and discourage families from smuggling drugs.

By March 2002

Ensure that the CARATs annual caseload reached 20,000; that there are 30 new prison-based rehabilitation programmes and that 5,000 prisoners per year go through treatment programmes.

Have developed and implemented a model to assess the levels and routes of supply of drugs within prisons.

To reduce the rate of positive tests from prison random drug tests from 20 per cent. (in 1998–99) to 16 per cent.

The targets for March 2000 have been met through the introduction of CARATs in all prisons and twenty-one new treatment programmes. A further eight treatment programmes and four new therapeutic communities will start this year. There are 60 new passive and twelve new active drug dogs, bringing the totals to 121 and 196 respectively. CCTV is available in visits areas in 118 prisons. Improving intelligence is an ongoing task. New sanctions for visitors caught smuggling drugs were introduced in April 1999. They include a ban on the visitors concerned and the imposition of closed visits for three months.

The Prison Service is on course to meet these targets.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what meetings she has had in the last year with prison governors on the reduction of drug use in prisons. [119961]

Mr. Ian McCartney: None. My right hon. Friend the Minster for the Cabinet Office visited HMP Kirklevington Grange at Yarm, Cleveland, on Friday 11 February. This visit was to launch the Learning Labs initiative and to meet participants on the Prisoners' Passport project. On this occasion the prison governor was unable to be present.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will give details of the financial support provided by her Department for programmes designed to reduce the use of drugs in prisons. [119959]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Prison Service receives no financial support from the Cabinet Office to support its drugs strategy.

The Prison Service received an additional £76 million from HM Treasury for the three year period 1999–2000 to 2001–02 for its drugs strategy as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Online Services

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what proportion of Government services are currently available online through the internet. [119934]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My Department is currently preparing the spring 2000 report monitoring progress towards the targets for electronic service delivery, which will identify the information requested by the hon. Member. I will be placing the report in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the targets she has set concerning the online availability of Government services. [119967]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) on 30 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 203W.

People's Panel

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will publish the 3, 4 and 5 waves of quantitative research carried out through the People's Panel. [120009]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are committed to publishing the results of research carried out using the People's Panel. The results of the third wave of research were published on 15 July 1999, and the fourth wave of research on 3 April 2000. On 17 January 2000 we also published the results of a re-analysis of the first three waves of research which looked at the attitudes of older people. On each occasion, publication was announced by issue of a press release and copies of summaries placed in the House Libraries and on the People's Panel website at www.servicefirst.gov.uk/index/pphome.htm.

The fifth wave of research, examining people's satisfaction with, and expectations of, public services is currently under way. We plan to publish the results in July.

Executive Agencies and NDPBs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the timetable is for future option studies for executive agencies and NDPBs. [120008]

Mr. Stringer: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 608–09W. The Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies 1999 Report, Cm 4657, and the Executive Agencies 1999 Report, Cm 4658, which were published and laid in both Houses on that day listed the current position regarding the quinquennial review of the non-departmental public bodies and the agencies included in each report.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what meetings she has had with the Prime Minister to discuss the work of the Performance and Innovation Unit on management of cross-cutting policies. [119953]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have not had any meetings with the Prime Minister specifically to discuss the work of the Performance and Innovation Unit on management of cross-cutting policies, but this subject does come up from time to time in our frequent discussions across a range of subjects.

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what meetings she has had with the Prime Minister in the current year to discuss the work of the Social Exclusion Unit. [119956]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have not had any meetings with the Prime Minister in the current year specifically to discuss the work of the Social Exclusion Unit, but this subject does come up from time to time in our frequent discussions across the range of my responsibilities.

Press Officers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many times press officers have accompanied Ministers on foreign visits in each of the past three years. [119931]

Marjorie Mowlam: Details of press officers accompanying Ministers on foreign visits are not held centrally. I can, however, respond regarding foreign visits of Cabinet Office Ministers since May 1997.

As Minister for the Cabinet Office I have not been accompanied by a press officer on any of my foreign visits, nor was my predecessor. Records indicate that, since May 1997, press officers have accompanied other Cabinet Office Ministers as follows: my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) on five occasions and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) on two occasions.

Government Car Service

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list gross expenditure on the Government Car Service in 1999–2000. [120058]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car and Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Letter from Nick Matheson to Mr. Andrew Lansley, dated April 2000:

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office has asked me in my capacity as the Chief Executive responsible for the Government Car Service to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the gross expenditure for the Agency in 1999–2000.

The estimated gross expenditure for the Government Car Service for 1999–2000 is £7.7 million. The accounts for the full year are currently being finalised and will be audited by the NAO.

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to review the operation of regulatory impact assessments. [119936]

Mr. Stringer: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 53W.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many Departments have reported on their regulatory performance in departmental reports published in April 2000 in terms agreed with the Regulatory Impact Unit. [120011]

Mr. Stringer: All of the key regulatory Departments have published Regulatory Reporting sections in their Annual Departmental Reports. The key Departments are:

Department of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Treasury, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Inland Revenue, Department of Health, Home Office, Health and Safety Executive, Department for Education and Employment, Customs and Excise.

Social Exclusion Funds

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will introduce new arrangements for providing funds to deprived communities to tackle social exclusion that do not rely on matched funding from the communities concerned; and if she will make a statement. [119577]

Marjorie Mowlam: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister launched consultation on 12 April on the Social Exclusion Unit's framework National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. This includes analysis of the obstacles to securing funding in deprived communities and proposals to overcome them.

In addition, this Government have already committed £800 million over 10 years to the New Deal for Communities programme which is being used to regenerate some of England's poorest neighbourhoods.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museums and Galleries (London)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which national museums and galleries in London are funded by his Department. [119806]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The national museums and galleries in London sponsored by my Department are as follows: the British Museum; the Imperial War Museum, including its branches at the Cabinet War Rooms and HMS Belfast; the National Gallery; the National Maritime Museum, encompassing the Royal Observatory, Greenwich; the National Portrait Gallery; the Natural History Museum; the National Museum of Science and industry (the Science Museum); the Tate Gallery, encompassing Tate Britain and Tate Modern; the Victoria and Albert Museum, including its branches at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood and the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden and the Wallace Collection. The Royal Armouries, which has a major museum at Leeds, and the Museum of Artillery at Fort Nelson near Portsmouth, also has a site within the Tower of London.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119512]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119445]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department is currently collecting data as input into the Cabinet Office spring 2000 report on the progress towards the delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005. I do not want to pre-empt that report but I can say that we are looking very closely at the opportunities arising from electronic service delivery. My Department relaunched its website a month ago providing access to a range of departmental information and services as well as linking out to our wider sectors who are already creating a range of exciting online services such as the 24 Hour Museum and the BTA's "VisitBritain" tourist information site. These are already proving very popular and provide an indication of how service delivery will develop over the coming years.

This is an area that is fundamental to my Department's aims of quality, access, education and developing the creative economy, and our service delivery plans will reflect this.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a substantive response to his letter of 28 January on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Aylin. [120021]

Mr. Chris Smith: I give my sincere apologies to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire for the delay in responding to his letter of 28 January on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Aylin. I replied to his letter on 19 April.

Stonehenge

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will announce the preferred developer of the Stonehenge visitor centre; and if he will make a statement. [119786]

Mr. Alan Howarth: A further statement will be made as soon as it is appropriate.

Countess Road, Amesbury

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the properties in Countess Road, Amesbury *(a)* which have been purchased on behalf of English Heritage and *(b)* on which there is an option to purchase on behalf of English Heritage; and if he will make a statement. [119787]

Mr. Alan Howarth: English Heritage owns 18 Countess Road and a small paddock which is accessed from Countess Road and has an option to acquire land at Countess East which includes 14 and 16 Countess Road.

HEALTH

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department spent (i) directly and (ii) indirectly on asylum seekers in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998 and *(e)* 1999; and what estimate has been made of expenditure in 2000. [119487]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The Home Office will be responding to this Question on behalf of Government as a whole, using information that we have provided to them.

NHS Treatment Guidelines

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to review the NHS guidelines for the treatment of people from abroad. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, [120003]

Ms Stuart: Policy on overseas visitors is kept under continuous review. New regulations were recently introduced which require the new primary care trusts to identify and charge overseas visitors where necessary and which also clarified the removal of Hong Kong from the list of countries with which we hold reciprocal healthcare agreements. (The National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Amendment Regulations 2000. SI 2000 No.602).

In addition, we are looking at the current guidance available to hospitals and the public with a view to producing revised versions which are more user friendly.

Medicines Control Agency

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the high level targets for the Medicines Control Agency for 2000–01. [120348]

Yvette Cooper: The high level targets for the Medicines Control Agency are included in its Annual Business Plan, copies of which have been placed in the Library today.

Physical Punishment

Mr. Brazier: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his Department's consultation document "Protecting Children, Supporting Parents", if he will list the eight countries in which there are explicit bans on physical punishment by parents, citing the documentary evidence for the existence of the ban in each country. [119817]

Mr. Hutton: The countries concerned are listed in the document. They are: Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Austria, Cyprus, Croatia and Latvia.

The documentary sources are the Acts and Statutes of the relevant countries.

Circular HSC 1999/162: LAC (99) 28

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many reports he has received from the Social Services Inspectorate about the implementation of circular HSC 1999/162: LAC (99) 28; and how many of these reports indicate that the circular is not being properly implemented. [119862]

Mr. Hutton: No formal reports have been received. However, the Social Services Inspectorate regularly undertakes detailed assessment of local social service authorities' performance including services for learning disabled people. In addition, a survey of the use of the Direction on Choice to which the circular refers was carried out in 1998 and this was followed up by a series of regional seminars in the summer of 1999 to disseminate the lessons learned. We are also developing a national learning disability strategy to be launched later this year which will aim to eliminate inconsistencies in service delivery.

Regeneration Initiatives

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list for each *(a)* area-based and *(b)* other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible (i) the amount budgeted and (ii) the total expended in each financial year for the planned lifetime of each initiative; [119789]

(2) if he will list the number and value of *(a)* bids and *(b)* grants made in each of the last three financial years for which figures are available, for each (i) area-based and (ii) other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible. [119795]

Ms Stuart: Health action zones (HAZs) are the only area-based initiative for which the Department is responsible. Most of the additional resources available to health authorities in HAZs are allocated on the basis of a NHS weighted capitation formula rather than through a bidding process. Health Authorities that are HAZs received and spent an additional £5.6 million in the first year of the initiative (1998–99) and £89.4 million in 1999–2000 (£3 million less than budgeted for). Resources for 2000–01 and beyond have yet to be finalised.

Other initiatives classified as regeneration-related initiatives are the Healthy Schools Initiative, Personal Medical Services (PMS) Pilots and the Primary Care and Primary School Partnership pilots.

The resources budgeted for and allocated to the Healthy Schools Initiative, which has now been rolled out across England, were £1.2 million in 1998–99 and £2.9 million in 1999–2000. £5.7 million will be available in 2000–01. No decisions have been made about resources for future years. The cost of the initiative is shared equally between the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment.

PMS pilots receive a "fair share" of the resources that would have been available from the general medical services non-cash limited pool. The only additional resources they receive are for preparation costs. The preparation costs for the first two waves of PMS pilots were £2 million in 1997–98, £2 million in 1998–99 and £3 million in 1999–2000. No decisions have yet been made on a third wave.

The Primary Care and Primary School Partnership pilots were budgeted to receive £350,000 in 1999–2000 and 2000–01. £100,000 was carried forward from 1999–2000. No decisions have yet been made about further expenditure.

Slimming Drugs

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he intends to implement the ruling of the European Court on the reinstatement of slimming drugs proscribed by the Medicines Control Agency on 9 April. [119995]

Ms Stuart: The United Kingdom Licensing Authority has today rescinded the ban on the marketing of amfepramone, following the European Court's decision to suspend the European ban. Although there are no new safety concerns with this product, in the interests of public health and reassurance to patients, the urgent advice of the Committee on the Safety of Medicines has been

sought. The European Court has not given any decision in relation to the European ban on phentermine—another anorectic substance previously on the UK market.

PFI Projects

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the annual revenue cost is for each of the next 20 years of the PFI projects approved to date. [118861]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is shown in the following table, and represents private finance initiative schemes which have reached financial close.

£ million

Financial year	*Annual revenue cost*[1]
2000–01	114.67
2001–02	204.41
2002–03	268.96
2003–04	317.53
2004–05	317.01
2005–06	317.26
2006–07	314.69
2007–08	313.03
2008–09	310.92
2009–10	307.52
2010–11	305.14
2011–12	304.16
2012–13	304.20
2013–14	304.24
2014–15	303.68
2015–16	300.86
2016–17	300.24
2017–18	300.32
2018–19	300.97
2019–20	299.62

[1] All schemes with a capital value greater than £1 million

Royal Commission on Long-Term Care

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the latest estimate of the cost of full implementation of the report of the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care in *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* the UK. [119858]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 444–45. The *pro rata* costs for Scotland are normally estimated to be 10 per cent. of the United Kingdom total.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will direct the Governor of St. Helena to establish a minimum wage on St. Helena. [119807]

Mr. Battle: The St. Helena Government is committed to reviewing the feasibility of introducing a minimum wage this financial year, against the background of a 10 per cent. increase in salaries and wages for civil servants (70 per cent. of the workforce) from 1 April 2000 and a reduction in income tax and raising of tax thresholds in the Appropriation Bill passed in March.

Iran

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent developments there have been in the trial of the 13 Jews detained in Iran for espionage; and if he will make a statement. [120481]

Mr. Hain: Since my statement to the House on 11 April, we have learned that, despite earlier announcements the majority were accused of lesser charges, 10 of the 13 defendants are being tried for espionage and that the trial is being held in closed session. We continue to press our deep concern at these developments on the Iranian authorities, in consultation with our EU partners, stressing the need for a transparent and fair trial.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he plans to take with respect to the granting of export licences for military materials to Zimbabwe. [119864]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 184–85W to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge).

We are deeply concerned by the continuing violence in Zimbabwe resulting in the death of another farmer on 18 April and the continued attacks and killings of members of the opposition. We continue to monitor developments closely. We take the internal situation into account when considering applications for licences for the export of any goods controlled for strategic reasons. All export licence applications are considered against the UK national criteria and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. If there is a clearly identifiable risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression or external aggression the licence is refused.

SCOTLAND

Works of Art

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much has been spent on *(a)* the upkeep and *(b)* the purchase of works of art in his Department for each financial year since 1992. [117474]

Dr. Reid: Details relating to the Government Art Collection were given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on 4 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 392W.

The costs of the upkeep and the purchase of works of art in the then Scottish Office for each financial year since 1992 are given in the table. Figures for 1999–2000 include Scottish Office expenditure up to 1 July 1999 and for the Scotland Office for the remainder of the year.

£

Year	*Upkeep*	*Purchase*	*Total*
1992–93	0	0	0
1993–94	0	653.65	653.65
1994–95	0	621.36	621.36
1995–96	0	92,920.27	92,920.27

£

Year	Upkeep	Purchase	Total
1996–97	0	0	0
1997–98	475.88	0	475.88
1998–99	0	3,435.37	3,435.37
1999–2000	0	3,062.75	3,062.75

Expenditure in 1995–96 includes costs relating to the completion of the new Scottish Office headquarters building at Victoria Quay, Edinburgh. These items totalled £73,927.00.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what has been the percentage change compared to 1990–91 in his Department's energy efficiency in each year since 1990–91; and if he will make a statement. [119000]

Dr. Reid: Information from the former Scottish Office is only available from 1991–92. Details of the percentage change in energy consumption from that date are:

Year	Percentage change
1991–92	0
1992–93	+6
1993–94	+8
1994–95	+13
1995–96	+19
1996–97	+13
1997–98	+4
1998–99	−4
1999–2000	[1]-10

[1] Estimated

The percentage change figures indicate that, until 1996, energy consumption was increasing. This was largely because the period in question coincided with the rapid expansion of information technology and, in particular, the growth of desktop computing and associated equipment. Since then, significant improvements have been made.

These figures do not include the Scottish Prisons Service and the Scottish Courts Service.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his Department's energy efficiency performance target, expressed as a percentage change in comparison to 1990–91, for each of the next five years; and if he will make a statement. [119001]

Dr. Reid: My Department took on its present form on 1 July 1999, following devolution in Scotland. We have not yet set energy efficiency targets for the next five years but any targets set will be in line with the Government's environment and climate change commitments.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119519]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

Prohibited Weapons

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many prohibited weapons are held by private individuals in Scotland by the permission of the Secretary of State. [119871]

Dr. Reid: No prohibited weapons are currently held by private individuals in Scotland by the permission that was previously granted by the Secretary of State and is now granted by Scottish Ministers.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119509]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W, by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Legal Aid

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the potential for conflict of interest when legal aid managers award legal aid to clients of solicitors' firms in which their spouses are partners. [119698]

Mr. Lock: Before the establishment of the Legal Services Commission on 1 April 2000, the Legal Aid Board was responsible for granting applications for legal aid. In 1998, the Board introduced a Code of Conduct for its staff. All key members of staff were required to ensure that any possible conflicts of interest were identified at an early stage and that appropriate action was taken to resolve them.

The requirements under the Staff Code of Conduct continue to apply to all staff of the Legal Services Commission, which is the successor to the Legal Aid Board. Where a conflict of interest is reported, the Senior Manager will make arrangements to ensure that the staff member concerned is not involved in any decision relating to the award or management of legal aid, or funding under the Access to Justice Act 1999, to the firm or organisation in which he or she has an interest.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what has been the total cost of *(a)* civil and *(b)* criminal legal aid in Northern Ireland in each year since 1990. [119696]

Mr. Lock: Net expenditure in relation to civil legal aid, advice by way of representation, legal advice and assistance and criminal legal aid in Northern Ireland since 1990–91 is as follows:

£ million

	Civil	ABWOR	LAA	Criminal	Total
1990–91	2.89	1.30	2.20	5.80	12.19
1991–92	3.45	1.37	2.83	7.17	14.82
1992–93	3.73	1.64	4.93	9.61	19.91
1993–94	3.62	1.49	5.21	6.68	17.00
1994–95	4.38	1.29	4.67	9.59	19.93
1995–96	4.64	1.28	5.68	14.18	25.78
1996–97	5.68	1.46	4.60	14.33	26.07
1997–98	5.75	1.87	3.68	17.55	28.85
1998–99	6.47	1.45	6.24	15.93	30.09

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the firms of solicitors in Northern Ireland with clients who have received *(a)* civil and *(b)* criminal legal aid each year since 1990; and how much (i) civil and (ii) criminal legal aid they received. [119697]

Mr. Lock: The administration of the legal aid scheme in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Law Society of Northern Ireland under the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. This function is exercised through the Legal Aid Committee which is a Committee of the Council of the Law Society of Northern Ireland and the Legal Aid Department which is a Department of the Law Society. The Legal Aid Department is also responsible for the administration of criminal legal aid on the Lord Chancellor's behalf.

The number of firms of solicitors in Northern Ireland with clients who have received civil legal aid since 1997, excluding advice by way of representation and legal advice and assistance, is 484. For the same period the number of firms of solicitors in Northern Ireland with clients who have received criminal legal aid is 452. Copies of the lists have been laid in the Library of the House of Commons.

The amounts received by these firms of solicitors for civil legal aid and criminal legal aid in 1997–98 and 1998–99 were as follows:

£ million

	Civil	Criminal
1997–98	2.99	8.10
1998–99	3.37	6.71

A breakdown of the amount paid to each firm in each year since 1990 could only be determined by undertaking a vast amount of work on the Legal Aid Department's former and now obsolete computer, checking manual records and extracting information of part of a year for the new computer system, which is currently being installed. This work would disrupt the implementation of the new computer system and divert staff from their tasks of processing legal aid applications. Accordingly the information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mediation and Reconciliation

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much was spent by governmental departments in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980 and *(c)* 1999 on mediation and reconciliation schemes to support marriages. [119766]

Jane Kennedy: The figures for 1970 and 1980 are not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. In the financial year 1999–2000 the Lord Chancellor's Department spent £3.2 million on marriage and relationship support. In line with Sir Graham Hart's recommendations in his report on Marriage Support Funding (November 1999), the allocation is being increased to £4 million in 2000–01; £4.5 million in 2002–02; and to £5 million in 2002–03.

Divorce Cases

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proportion of the Legal Aid Fund was spent on divorce cases in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980 and *(c)* 1999; and how much was spent in each of those years in 1999 prices. [119764]

Mr. Lock: Legal Aid is not normally available for divorce proceedings. It is available however for matters ancillary to divorce, such as spousal maintenance and property issues, and for residence and contact matters relating to children.

In 1979–80 and 1998–99, expenditure on all proceedings relating to divorce and ancillary matters represented 30 per cent. and 18 per cent. of the total Legal Aid Fund respectively.

At 1999 prices, the amounts spent on matrimonial proceedings were:

1999: £175.5 million

1980: £65.0 million

Comparable figures for the year 1969–70 are not available.

Libel Actions (Financial Backers)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department in how many failed libel actions brought since 1995 the litigant has refused to disclose to the court the identities of those who helped finance the action so that costs could be recovered; what steps the court took in each case; and if he will make a statement. [120002]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department does not keep statistics of libel cases which fail and in which the litigant has refused to disclose to the court the source of those who helped to finance the action. It is not possible to keep records of the costs outcomes of libel cases because many cases do not reach trial but are settled by agreement. In settled cases the court will not be privy to the arrangement on costs.

The question of financial support for defamation proceedings will be addressed in a consultation paper to be issued by my Department in the near future.

Public Records

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on

progress made since March 1999 on allowing access to documents over 30 years old to which s.3(4) of the Public Records Act 1958 applies. [119835]

Mr. Lock: It is now normal procedure, when government departments and agencies make applications for the Lord Chancellor's permission to retain records over 30 years old, for officers of the Public Record Office to encourage them to allow public access. Such applications are further scrutinised by the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on Public Records. The Advisory Council may request access for the public as a condition of an application proceeding to receive the Lord Chancellor's approval.

As a result, the public will be granted access to the great majority of the records retained under s.3(4) since March 1999. The commonest reason for access to be refused is that the retained records remain sensitive. In such cases access would undermine the reason for retention.

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the implications for judicial appointment procedures in England and Wales of the proposals for judicial appointments commissions for Scotland and for Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [119803]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor is aware of the proposals for Scotland and Northern Ireland. He has decided to appoint a Commissioner for Judicial Appointments in England and Wales as recommended by Sir Leonard Peach following his scrutiny of the appointments procedures and to take forward his other recommendations for change. The Commissioner, as recommended by Sir Leonard, will give the Lord Chancellor independent and impartial advice on the full range of appointments matters. Further reform is not ruled out for the future, but not immediately planned, now that the existing system has been investigated and endorsed subject to certain changes which will be implemented and evaluated.

Queen's Counsel

Mr. Cox: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many Queen's Counsel are from ethnic minority communities, broken down between *(a)* men and *(b)* women. [120082]

Mr. Lock: The information is not available in the form requested.

Before 1989, applicants for appointment as Queen's Counsel were not invited to declare their ethnic origin. Since that year, applicants have been invited to declare their ethnic origin, but they are not obliged to do so. There is, therefore, no definitive record of the number of Queen's Counsel of ethnic minority origin.

Sine 1989 (and including this year), 22 applicants who chose to declare an ethnic minority origin have been appointed as Queen's Counsel; of these, 19 are men and 3 are women.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many of the Queen's Counsel to be appointed on Maundy Thursday are *(a)* women, *(b)* from ethnic minority backgrounds, *(c)* solicitors and *(d)* (i) below the age of 45 and (ii) above the age of 60 years; and what was the (A) highest, (B) lowest, (C) average and (D) mean declared fee income of (x) successful and (y) unsuccessful candidates. [119819]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department's press notice number 134/00, issued for publication on Maundy Thursday, announces the names of those to be appointed Queen's Counsel on Wednesday 3 May, and I refer my hon. Friend to that notice.

That press notice includes, as it has in previous years, statistical information on the numbers of female, ethnic minority and solicitor applicants and successful applicants. Following a recommendation in Sir Leonard Peach's report into the appointment processes of judges and Queen's Counsel, it also includes for the first time a table indicating the averages and quartile distributions of the average declared fees for all applicants, unsuccessful applicants and successful applicants.

The additional information requested by my hon. Friend is that 41 of the successful applicants are under 45; and none is over 60 years of age.

Regeneration-related Initiatives

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the number and value of *(a)* bids for and *(b)* grants made in each of the last three financial years for which figures are available, for each (i) area-based and (ii) other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible. [119797]

Mr. Lock: This Department has not received any bids or made grants for area-based or other regeneration-related initiatives in any of the last three financial years.

TREASURY

Married Couple's Allowance

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the number of households which will lose entitlement to married couple's allowance in 2001–02 who will not become entitled to the children's tax credit; and what *(a)* the average loss per household will be in such cases and *(b)* the total saving will be for the Treasury from this group. [116577]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 28 March 2000]:* We are replacing the married couple's allowance with the children's tax credit, which is worth more than twice as much and is better targeted on the families who most need support—those with growing children. As a result of the measures we have taken, including the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit and record increases in Child Benefit, families with children will be on average £850 a year better off from April 2001. Estimates of the

total expected cost and yield of the abolition of MCA and the introduction of children's tax credit have been published in Table A2.1 of the FSBR.

Tobacco Taxation

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what amount of money he estimates the increased tobacco taxation will raise for expenditure on the NHS; and if the expenditure projections for the NHS will be sustained irrespective of the yield from tobacco taxation. [117036]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The projected exchequer yield from the increased tobacco duty of £235 million in the full year, as set out in Table A13 in the FSBR, is taken into account in the commitment of the extra £2 billion to the NHS in 2000–01, which we are guaranteeing to meet.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119507]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer to my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many Departments have submitted environmental appraisals with their draft public service agreements for the second comprehensive spending review; and if he will make a statement. [118859]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* It was a requirement that the analysis submitted by all Departments to inform the spending review include consideration of the impact of their proposals and programmes on sustainable development.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the objectives of the second comprehensive spending review. [118860]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 17 April 2000]:* The aim of the 2000 spending review is to determine how best Departments' programmes can contribute to the achievement of the Government's objectives, in particular their aims of:

- opportunity for everyone to fulfil their potential through education and employment;
- a fair and inclusive society in which communities are healthy and secure;
- higher productivity, sustainable growth and effective co-operation with our European and international partners.

The review will entail a rigorous scrutiny of Departments' performance in delivering effective and responsive services, improving efficiency and managing assets and other resources. It will also consider a range of issues which cross departmental boundaries.

The review will set new departmental spending plans within the firm overall limits for public spending announced in the Budget.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many representations his Department received in relation to this year's comprehensive spending review before 31 March; and if he will continue to accept representations from both public and private sector bodies. [119584]

Mr. Andrew Smith: No formal count is made, but the Treasury had received a number of representations in relation to the 2000 spending review by 31 March. Treasury Ministers will continue to accept representations from both public and private bodies while the review continues, either directly or through our colleagues in other Departments.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the additional cost to his Department's salary bill if the minimum wage for all age groups was raised to *(a)* £4, *(b)* £4.20 and *(c)* £4.50 an hour. [119973]

Mr. Andrew Smith: There would be no additional cost to the Treasury's salary bill under any of the scenarios.

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the additional personal tax revenue if the minimum wage was set for all age groups at *(a)* £4, *(b)* £4.20 and *(c)* £4.50 per hour in (i) Scotland and (ii) the UK. [119972]

Dawn Primarolo: It is not possible to estimate the potential impact of raising the minimum wage on the labour market, so an accurate costing is not possible.

Inflation Figures

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what basis he has estimated that the inflation rate will be 3.4 per cent. in September 2000. [119994]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The basis for the projection that inflation will be 3.4 per cent. in September 2000 is set out in appendix A1 of the Financial Statement and Budget Report.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons the inflation rate he has assumed for September 2000 differs from the target inflation rate he has set for the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England. [119993]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The forecast of inflation in September 2000 referred to in the Budget is a forecast of the annual increase in the retail prices index (RPI), whereas the target inflation rate for the Monetary Policy Committee is the annual increase in retail prices excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX).

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much of the forecast additional spending on Working Families Tax Credit will be spent on recipients who would

have *(a)* been entitled and *(b)* not been entitled to Family Credit in (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02. [119947]

Dawn Primarolo: Figures for the projected expenditure on the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) and Disabled Person's Tax Credit are given in Table C12 of the March 2000 Financial Statement and Budget Report. In 1998–99, the last full year for Family Credit and Disability Working Allowance, the outturn expenditure on these was £2.6 billion.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been spent to date on the childcare tax credit of the Working Families Tax Credit; and what is his latest estimate of expenditure in *(a)* this financial year and *(b)* in each of the next two financial years. [108761]

Dawn Primarolo *[pursuant to her reply, 10 March 2000, c. 852W]:* The extra amounts of Working Families Tax Credit arising from the childcare tax credit in awards made by the end of January 2000 will result in expenditure of about £60 million during the 26-week period of award. It is estimated that for 2000–01, the first full year of the credit, the extra expenditure due to the childcare tax credits will be about £200 million. I very much regret that the figures given in my earlier reply were based on the average amounts of eligible child care costs, rather than the average extra award received as a result of the childcare tax credit.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many parents are claiming the childcare tax credit in respect of children *(a)* aged under eight years and *(b)* over eight years; and what is the average payment per (i) family and (ii) child. [108760]

Dawn Primarolo *[pursuant to her reply, 10 March 2000, c. 853W]:* Families in receipt of the childcare tax credit received on average an extra £31 per week as a result of this credit, or £25 per week per child receiving the child care. I very much regret that the figures given in my earlier reply were the average amounts of eligible child care costs.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many calls have been made to the WFTC helpline in each month since it was established. [119946]

Dawn Primarolo: Monthly figures on the number of calls handled by working families' tax credit helpline and response line are given in the table:

Month	*Helpline*[1]	*Response Line*[2]
September[3]	389,300	316,800
October	449,300	322,700
November	384,900	141,500
December	242,400	42,900
January	406,800	15,400
February	387,400	—
March	502,800	—

[1] The helpline has been in operation since the campaign launch of WFTC on the 8 September 1999.

[2] The response line has only been in operation during the first advertising campaign.

[3] The helpline and the response line were made operational on the 8 September 1999.

Combined Heat and Power Plant

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action has been taken as a result of the study by property advisers to the Civil Estate concerning the case for installation of a combined heat and power plant for central Government Departments. [120024]

Mr. Timms: A combined heat and power plant was installed in 1997–98 as part of the replacement of the central plant of the Whitehall district heating system. Generation of electricity commenced in July 1998.

Debt Relief

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which aspects of the Cologne G7 Summit agreement on debt relief have not been implemented by *(a)* the IMF, *(b)* the World bank and *(c)* individual countries. [118982]

Mr. Timms: The World bank, the IMF and all individual creditor countries signed up to implementation of the enhanced HIPC Initiative at the IMF/World bank annual meetings last September.

Some individual countries, including the UK, have now gone further than last September's agreement, by committing to provide 100 per cent. relief on the commercial debts of countries qualifying under the HIPC initiative. The UK Government welcome these developments as a further step along the road to providing faster, wider and deeper debt relief, and encourages other countries to follow suit.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on establishing the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Trust Fund; and what contributions have been made by *(a)* national and *(b)* international donors. [118983]

Mr. Timms: The HIPC Trust Fund was set up last year to assist multilateral creditors meet the cost falling to them from the enhanced HIPC framework.

The total amounts pledged and contributed to the Trust Fund are equal to roughly $2.4 billion. (Australia has pledged $12 million; Austria $19 million; Belgium $40 million; Canada $104 million; Denmark $42 million; Finland $25 million; France $199 million; Germany $252 million; Greece $10 million; Ireland $20 million; Italy $162 million; Japan $200 million; Luxembourg $3 million; Netherlands $169 million; Norway $41 million; Portugal $22 million; Spain $128 million; Sweden $49 million; Switzerland $28 million; United Kingdom $359 million; US $600 million.)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) which countries have already received debt relief through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries 2 programme; how much they have received; what progress is being made to relieve debt; and when the debt relief will be received; [118981]

(2) what proposals he has for improving the speed and performance of the IMF implementation process of the heavily indebted poor countries initiatives. [118984]

Mr. Timms: Bolivia, Mauritania, Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique have all reached their decision points under the enhanced HIPC initiative and are receiving debt relief. Bolivia will receive over $2 billion in relief: a

30 per cent. reduction in the net present value of its debt (additional to the relief already granted under the first HIPC initiative); Mauritania will receive $1.2 billion debt relief: a 50 per cent. reduction; Uganda $4.4 billion, or a 72 per cent. reduction; Tanzania $3 billion, or a reduction of 54 per cent.; and Mozambique £2 billion in debt relief, or a 40 per cent. reduction.

The UK was disappointed that, to date, only these five countries have started to receive relief under the enhanced HIPC initiative. In Washington, at the spring meetings of the IMF and World bank, shareholders re-affirmed their wish to see countries coming forward to decision point quickly.

The Chancellor and the Secretary of State for International Development recently wrote to the Acting Managing Director of the IMF and Chairman of the World bank, setting out their concerns over progress and urging them to consider the introduction of a HIPC Implementation Unit. The UK therefore welcomed the announcement by the Bank and Fund that they will be setting up a joint committee on HIPC implementation, as well as providing monthly briefing sessions to both Boards on the progress of individual countries under the initiative.

National Insurance

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the additional revenue to the UK from *(a)* raising the ceiling on national insurance for employers to £1,000 a week and *(b)* charging national insurance at a rate of 5 per cent. for earnings over this level. [119969]

Dawn Primarolo: There is no ceiling for employer national insurance contributions.

UK Debt Management Office

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish the UK Debt Management Office's targets for 2000–01. [120349]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The DMO's targets for 2000–01 are set out as follows, together with the outturn against the equivalent targets for 1999–2000. The range of targets has been extended somewhat to reflect the taking over of responsibility by the DMO for Exchequer cash management on 3 April 2000. The DMO is today also publishing its Business Plan for 2000–01. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Targets for the Debt Management Office 2000–01

1. To ensure full compliance with the Government's remit for the DMO as set out in the Debt Management Report, within the tolerances and subject to the review triggers notified separately to the Office and consistently with the objectives of monetary policy. *[Target fully met in 1999–2000]*
2. To ensure that the maximum time taken to issue the results of gilt auctions and structured Treasury Bill tenders does not exceed 40 minutes while achieving complete accuracy. *[Target met in 1999–2000, with the exception of the auction in May 1999 when there was an unusually high number of bids]*
3. To ensure that the maximum time taken to issue the results of ad hoc Treasury Bill or other tenders does not exceed 15 minutes. *[New target]*
4. To achieve complete accuracy, within agreed accounting tolerances, in the recording and reporting of transactions through the Debt Management Account, and in delivering money (and reconciling payments) to the NLF. *[The DMA came into operation in November 1999 since when the targeted requirements have been met]*
5. To acknowledge all letters and e-mail inquiries from the public within eight working days and for at least 95 per cent. to be sent a substantive reply within three weeks. *[Equivalent target in 1999–2000 fully met]*
6. To achieve less than 10 breaches of the Operational Market Notices (excluding any breaches that the Treasury accept were beyond control of the Office). *[There was one breach of the gilts Operational Notice in 1999–2000]*
7. To ensure that the qualifications that the NAO have made in respect of the GOOA are satisfactorily addressed in the running and presentation of the DMA. *[See target 4—The first DMA accounts will not be available until 2001–02]*
8. To ensure that the statutory constraint on DMO market borrowing (not to exceed its deposits with the NLF and Bank of England) is always met. *[New target]*
9. To ensure that, where there is a late change in the forecast, any necessary use of end of day borrowing or lending facilities is notified by the due time. *[New target]*
10. To achieve a minimum of 99 per cent. (by value) successful settlement of agreed trades on the due date. *[New target]*
11. To achieve a minimum of 99 per cent. (by value) successful settlement of agreed trades on the due date. *[New target]*

Central Government Audit

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made in taking forward the review of central Government audit announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 28 February. [120482]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am pleased to announce that Lord Sharman, a former senior partner at KPMG International, has agreed to lead this review. Lord Sharman will report to (as well as being a member of) a Steering Group chaired by the Chief Secretary. Arrangements are being made to provide him with appropriate support. The full membership of the Steering Group will be announced in due course.

Fuel Duty

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason he raised fuel duty by 3.4 per cent. in his recent budget. [119992]

Mr. Timms: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) on 5 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 497W.

Departmental Running Costs

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the increase in the overall running costs of Government departments. [119962]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The recently published figures for the running costs of Government Departments show that the final spend for 1998–99, the latest year for which final data are available, is £110 million less in cash terms than the previously published estimated outturn for that year.

Spending plans published by the previous Administration were higher overall for the three years 1997–98 to 1999–2000 than this Government have achieved.

In real terms, administrative expenditure totalled £15,014 million in 1994–95, £14,737 million in 1995–96 and £14,323 million in 1996–97. This Government spent £13,725 million in 1997–98 and £14,003 million in 1998–99—the last year for which final figures are available.

DEFENCE

Royal Fleet Auxiliary

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he will let the contracts for the two new Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships; what is his estimate of the cost of the contracts; and if he will make a statement; [118061]

(2) which British yards have tendered for the contract to build *(a)* one and *(b)* both of the new Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships; and if he will make a statement. [118058]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Warmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 20 April 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the procurement of two new Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships. I assume that you are referring to the Alternative Landing Ships Logistic (ALSL) Programme. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of Defence Procurement Agency.

Five UK shipyards have expressed an interest in the ALSL project and each is being invited to tender for their design and build. The five companies are:

Appledore Shipbuilders Ltd.

BAE SYSTEMS Marine Ltd.

Cammell Laird Shipyard

Harland and Wolff Shipbuilding and Heavy Industries Ltd.

Swan Hunter (Tyneside) Ltd.

The contract will be awarded to the shipyard that offers the best whole life value for money.

An invitation to tender (ITT) was issued on 14 April. Contract placement for the design and build of two new ALSLs is planned to occur in late 2000. The estimated cost for the construction of the two vessels is £138M.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what foreign yards his Department has contacted with regard to the construction of the two new Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships; and if he will make a statement. [118660]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Warmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 20 April 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the procurement of two new Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships. I assume that you are referring to the Alternative Landing Ships Logistic (ALSLs) Programme. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

No foreign yards have been contacted about the construction of the two ALSLs.

ALSLs are classed as "warlike" and will be built in the UK. Five UK shipyards have expressed an interest in the ALSL project and have been invited to tender for design and build.

Naval Procurement (Roll on/Roll off Ferries)

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the effect of his decision to finance the Royal Navy's requirement for roll on/roll off ferries by means of a public private partnership, on the protection of the relevant contracts from the Public Procurement Directive available to military procurement contracts under the Treaty of European Union. [118663]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence's requirement for a strategic sealift capability is defined as non-warlike and ships providing the service will not be warships. Rather, they will be commercial standard ro/ros. The competition for the requirement has, therefore, to be conducted under European Community and World Trade Organisation public procurement rules. In such circumstances, a MOD requirement that stipulates that service providers or suppliers provide British built ships would be contrary to our EC obligations prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of nationality.

The requirement to compete in this way is not, therefore, influenced by whether the service is provided through PFI or more traditional procurement methods. We are, of course, doing all we can within the bounds of fair competition to give UK industry the best opportunity to participate in the programme.

Sandown-class Minehunters

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the contract for the last two of the Sandown-class minehunters will be completed. [118903]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 20 April 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence asking when the contract for the last two of the Sandown Class Mine Hunters will be completed. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

HMS Blythe is due to be delivered to the Ministry of Defence on 31 March 2001.

HMS Shoreland is due to be delivered to the Ministry of Defence on 31 December 2001.

The contract also covers a 2 year warranty period for the completion of any outstanding work or defects after the delivery of each ship.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made with bringing into service the two new aircraft carriers; whether the target set in the Strategic Defence Review has been adhered to; and if he will make a statement. [119168]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford, North (Ms Perham) and for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 678–80.

Online Services

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the services which *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the executive agencies responsible to his Department (i) provide online and (ii) expect to be deliverable online by 2002. [119444]

Dr. Moonie: So that the Cabinet Office can publish the spring 2000 report monitoring progress towards delivery of all Government services electronically by 2005, we are currently collecting data which will include our progress on delivering 25 per cent. of Government services electronically by 2002. I do not want to pre-empt that report, but I can say that we currently provide a range of services electronically that include receiving recruitment applications and providing general and specialist information.

British Meat (Armed Services)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of *(a)* lamb, *(b)* pork, *(c)* chicken and *(d)* turkey purchased for the armed services was of British origin in the last 12 months. [119702]

Dr. Moonie: The supply of food to the armed forces is contracted out to 3663. Our policy is aimed at sourcing British products wherever these are competitively priced. Our contractor advises that over the last 12 months the following percentages of meat were sourced in the UK—2 per cent. lamb; 100 per cent. pork; 50 per cent. bacon and gammon; and 30 per cent. chicken. No turkey was sourced in the UK.

Meteorological Office

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Meteorological Office for 2000–01. [120296]

Dr. Moonie: The Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office is responsible for providing meteorological and related environmental services, including climate change prediction, to a wide range of customers, including the armed forces, Government, civil aviation, shipping, emergency services, media, commerce, industry and general public. It also undertakes research related to meteorology and climate. During 2000–01, the Meteorological Office will be set the following challenging targets:

Key Target 1:

To achieve a value for the Numerical Weather Prediction Index of at least 101.6 index points on 31 March 2001, from a baseline of 100.0 on 31 March 2000;

Key Target 2:

To achieve a value for the Service Quality Index of at least 107.1 index points on 31 March 2001, from a baseline of 100.0 on 31 March 1997, in line with customer requirements. The Index covers representative services and products for defence, civil aviation, public and business customers;

Key Target 3:

To achieve a value for the Efficiency Index of at least 103.7 index points on 31 March 2001, from a baseline of 100.00 on 31 March 2000;

Key Target 4:

To achieve an overall return on capital employed in 2000–01 of not less than 0 per cent., while returning an operating profit of at least £13.7 million before strategic investments;

Key Target 5:

To achieve strategic investments in 2000–01 of at least £13.5 million.

Key Target 6:

To achieve a total contribution from commercial activities in 2000–01 of not less than £3.575 million.

In addition, a new Staff Skills Index will be developed during 2000–01. The aim will be to establish a baseline of staff competency levels, derived from the Meteorological Office's new competency-based method of staff appraisal, so that sensible targets can be set and announced for subsequent years.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he plans to take in respect of *(a)* British military personnel serving in Zimbabwe and *(b)* Zimbabwean military personnel receiving training in the UK. [119866]

Mr. Spellar: There are no plans to change the position of British military personnel based in Zimbabwe or Zimbabwean military personnel currently receiving training in the UK. Nevertheless, we continue to keep the situation under review.

DERA

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many posts at the DERA establishment in Aberporth, Ceredigion will *(a)* transfer to NewDERA and *(b)* be retained within his Department as a result of his proposals in the public/private partnership consultation document. [119984]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 366–67W, which outlined our proposals for the DERA public-private partnership. These are described in more detail in the consultation document, a copy of which can be found in the Library of the House, and on the Internet at www.mod.uk/commercial/ppp/dera/.

Under our current proposals, we envisage that the capabilities provided by Aberporth will form part of the NewDERA company. It is, therefore, likely that posts at Aberporth would transfer. However, no final decisions will be taken until the current consultation exercise comes to an end. We will of course listen carefully to views and comments received during this process.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Lord Levy

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 20 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 413W, if he will list the meetings between Lord Levy and *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials within his Department on Government business other than in his capacity as the Prime Minister's personal envoy delivering messages in the Middle East. [117782]

Mr. Byers: Neither I nor any of my Ministers has met Lord Levy on Government business.

Gas and Electricity Bills

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the annual amount spent by the average consumer on *(a)* gas and *(b)* electricity where payment is by (i) a pre-payment meter and (ii) direct debit. [118913]

Mrs. Liddell: Provisional estimates of average domestic gas and electricity bills for domestic consumers in 1999 are as follows:

Average UK domestic fuel bills[1]—1999 provisional estimates

£

Payment method	*Standard Quarterly credit*	*Monthly direct debit*	*Pre-payment meter*
Gas[2]	305	267	318
Electricity[3]	265	256	282

[1] Averages weighted by customer numbers
[2] An annual consumption level of 18,000kWh has been assumed
[3] An annual consumption level of 3,300kWh has been assumed. Customers with electric central heating are likely to consume considerably more electricity

These figures are published annually in the Department's annual "Digest of UK Energy Statistics" and in the "Energy Report".

Gas-fired Power Stations

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when a calculation was made of the total amount of the increase of emissions which would result from the moratorium on gas-fired power stations; and what it was. [119286]

Mr. Byers: Our White Paper, "Conclusions of The Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee", Cm 4071, stated that it was not possible to quantify the impact of the new energy framework on emissions. This is because the aim of the policy is not to achieve any particular outcome in terms of fuel mix in generation but to create a level playing field so that all forms of generation can compete equally and as a temporary precautionary measure to ensure the artificial encouragement for new gas plant that has arisen from distortions to the electricity market does not artificially undermine security and diversity of supply.

I announced on Monday 17 April that I would be lifting the stricter consents policy in October 2000 as soon as the new electricity trading arrangements were in place. The Government are determined to meet the UK commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 12½ per cent. below 1990 levels in 2008–12. The stricter consents policy and the timetable for its lifting is entirely consistent with meeting that target, and with moving towards our goal of reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. on 1990 levels.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the use his Department, its agencies and public bodies will make of the powers relating to the authorised obtaining of communications data in Part I, Chapter II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill once the Bill is enacted. [119517]

Ms Hewitt: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department on 19 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W.

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria the Towers Consortium need to fulfil to be eligible for regional selective assistance. [120094]

Mr. Byers: The criteria are set out in the booklet on the scheme, which is freely available. A copy is in the Library of the House.

Rover

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how quickly he could pay regional selective assistance to Rover following receipt of a valid application. [120093]

Mr. Byers: No such application has been received.

Electricity Industry

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress the Steering Group on Electricity Security and Stability Issues has made in following up the recommendations made by the Consultants Merz and McLellan in the White Paper, Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government Response to the fourth and fifth reports of the Trade and Industry Committee (Cm 4071), published in October 1998. [120544]

Mrs. Liddell: In the White Paper, the Government proposed a two-tier approach: an open consultancy group open to all interested parties, and a smaller steering group which would carry out most of the detailed work. The Steering Group, chaired by my Department, has published its findings today in the form of a consultation document. The group has concluded that the further work recommended by Merz and McLellan has been undertaken or is in hand and that there do not appear to be any immediate problems for the security and stability of the electricity grid system arising from the possible high levels of gas-fired generation. They have recommended that the Regulator should keep system security under review since the industry is undergoing a period of enormous change. The consultation document also addresses the individual recommendations by Merz and McLellan. Comments have been invited by Friday 16 June.

Copies of the consultation report are being circulated, in the first instance, to all those who responded to the consultation document on the Review of Energy Sources (listed in Annex G of Cm 4071). I am placing copies in the Libraries of the House. The document is also available on the DTI website at http://www.dti.gov.uk/energy/ and on request from Natalia Hill, EPTAC1b, DTI, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1H OET (Phone: 020 7215 6488).

Regeneration

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the number and value of *(a)* bids for and *(b)* grants made in each of the last three financial years for which figures are available, for each (i) area-based and (ii) other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible. [119800]

Mr. Caborn: I refer the hon. Member to the Annual report presented to Parliament pursuant to sections 11 and 15 of the Industrial Development Act 1982 and published on 26 July 1999.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for each *(a)* area-based and *(b)* other regeneration-related initiative for which his Department is responsible (i) the amount budgeted and (ii) the total expended in each financial year for the planned lifetime of each initiative. [119790]

Mr. Caborn: I refer the hon. Member to my Department's expenditure plans, Command 4611, published earlier this month.

Homeowner Compensation (Mining Areas)

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what compensation has been paid to homeowners whose properties *(a)* are rendered unsaleable and *(b)* have suffered undue financial loss in value due to their proximity to disused mineshafts in the last five years. [119782]

Mrs. Liddell: No compensation has been paid in these circumstances.

Radiocommunications Agency

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what targets he has set his Department's Radiocommunications Agency for 2000–01. [120543]

Mr. Byers: I have set the Radiocommunications Agency the following quality of service targets for 2000–01 in respect of its licensing and enforcement activities and correspondence. These are in addition to achieving an overall efficiency improvement of five per cent. over 1999–2000.

Licensing Targets

Category A

Licences that involve no frequency assignment site clearance or international co-ordination: 100 per cent. of applications for new or varied services to be awarded or rejected (with explanation) within five working days.

Category B

Licences that involve frequency assignment but no site clearance or international co-ordination: 90 per cent. of applications for new or varied services to be awarded or rejected (with explanation) within 15 working days; the remainder to be awarded or rejected within 25 working days or an explanation of the delay to be given.

Category C

Licences that require frequency assignment and site clearance and/or international co-ordination: 90 per cent. of applications for new or varied services to be awarded or rejected (with explanation) within 40 working days; the remainder to be awarded or rejected within 60 working days or an explanation of the delay to be given.

Enforcement

100 per cent. of safety of life services reports of interference to be investigated within 24 hours.

98 per cent. of business customers reports of interference to be investigated within five working days; the remainder within a further five days.

98 per cent. of domestic customers reports of interference to be investigated within one month; the remainder within a further month.

Correspondence

I also expect all correspondence from hon. Members delegated to the Chief Executive by Ministers or otherwise for reply, and all written complaints addressed to him about agency services, to be answered within 10 working days of receipt; the agency's inquiry point to respond to 95 per cent. of calls within 30 seconds; and 100 per cent. of valid invoices to be paid within 30 days of receipt (or as agreed with the supplier).

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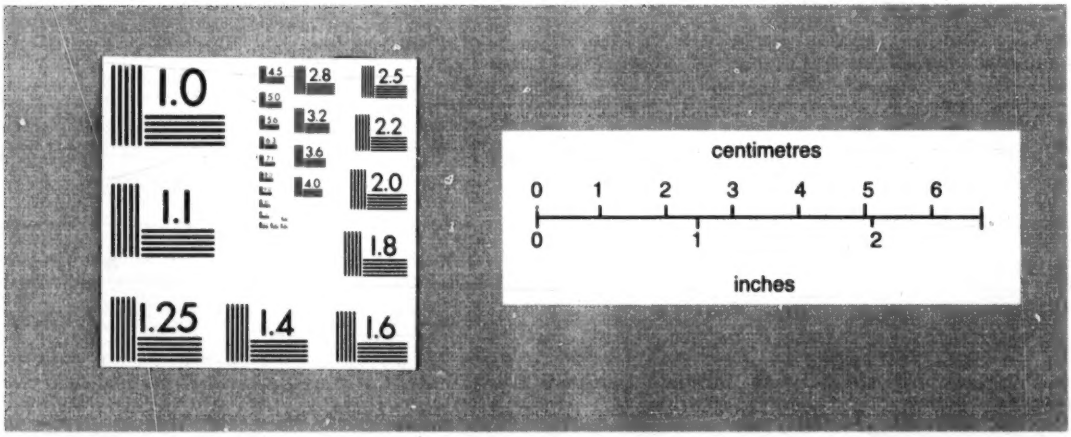

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Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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